Most eastern James Bay Cree consider themselves good Christians, and the older Cree regard Christianity as a traditional institution. Nevertheless, Cree hunters have retained many bush practices which come from an older, pantheistic religious practice. How could these people be good Christians and pantheists at the same time? Did the Crees not struggle against the missionaries, and to keep their old religion?¹

Consider the conventional wisdom: The eastern James Bay Cree accepted Christianity quite willingly, as did most of the northern Indians (e.g., Grant 1984:113). Their present lifestyle accommodates both belief systems. The Cree do not see a conflict between the two, and seem to be able to accommodate one into the other. But they have not abandoned the bush and animal-based beliefs and practices, either. There is little controversy that Cree beliefs are different from those of Euro-Canadians, judging by the work of Tanner (1979) among the Mistassini Cree, Feit (1978) among the Waswanipi Cree, and Scott (1983) among the Wemindji Cree. But this is not to say that Cree beliefs have survived intact; they are different, but “the issue is the extent to which they were also aboriginal” (Bishop 1984).

¹I owe much to Harvey Feit who stimulated early on my interest in these topics; I also thank Brian Craik, Toby Morantz, Nicholas Smith and Robert Preston who encouraged the development of the ideas in this paper. This work owes its existence to the remarkable men of the Chisasibi Cree Trappers Association (CTA) working group who met with me throughout 1984 and 1985. The study was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
After ten years of contact with the eastern James Bay Cree, I myself have problems with the conventional wisdom about the Crees' ability to accommodate both belief systems without stress or tension. The origins of the present paper go back to discussions of resource use systems at Chisasibi (formerly Fort George) with a self-selected group of senior hunters from the Chisasibi local Cree Trappers Association (CTA). The aim of the larger project was to try to provide a written record of resource use rules in the Chisasibi area. In the discussions, we were ranging over a wide area, including social rules of conduct in the bush which the hunters considered important as the context for the understanding of hunting rules. Soon there was a digression which resulted in a series of stories and jokes about missionaries in general, and about one well known 20th-century figure, Reverend Walton, in particular. The main purpose of this paper is to analyse these stories as evidence of tension between the two belief systems. Secondly, the paper will touch upon some similarities, as the Cree perceive them, between the old belief system and Christianity, as a reason behind the Cree acceptance of Christianity more or less readily, if not entirely comfortably.

Reverend Walton: Influential Christian

All but two Cree families in Chisasibi are Anglicans, and the great majority of the older men and women are church-going Christians. Church attendance of young adults and teenagers is at best spotty, leading the older people to bemoan the loss of Cree tradition. Among the older hunters, being a good hunter and being a good Christian go hand in hand. Virtually all the traditional leaders (as opposed to the younger political leaders) are both respected hunters and elders of the church. Of the five hunters in the CTA group, four of them, mid-40s to mid-60s in age, were religious people, one in his 30s was not.

Reverend Walton was one of the primary figures in conversion of Chisasibi Crees into Christianity. Désy (1968) portrays Rev. Walton as having charismatic influence on the Cree, a towering figure who was both feared and revered. Hyman provides a sketch of the man:

The Rev. W.G. Walton, who devoted 32 years of his life to this parish has achieved such a place of honor among the Indian and Eskimo people that even today he is respectfully referred to by old and young alike — many
of whom could only have known of him through the stories of their parents and grandparents . . . . He is pointed out as everything a missionary should be (but few are these days) . . . . Indians today also speak of how strict he was regarding the faith. He would stand outside where the service was being held and wait until every last individual was out of his tent and inside for the service. He is remembered as a "hellfire and brimstone" preacher. His influence as a source of white Christian values in all aspects of life must have been most dramatic. (Hyman 1971:33, 34)

Rev. Walton spoke fluent Cree, knew the custom and practices, and "was not easily fooled". A story from Rupert House passed on by Brian Craik indicates how well tuned he was to Cree cultural practices. Rev. Walton travelled up and down the coast, and on one occasion was in Rupert House to conduct a service. While he had the whole congregation before him, he asked if any hunters had been hunting moose recently. A number of hands went up. Rev. Walton asked them to meet with him the next morning; he had something to say to them. When he met with the moose hunters later, he told them that his wife was very fond of moose meat, but alas, hunters in Fort George were not as fortunate as those in Rupert House. There was no moose to be had. His wife would really appreciate some moose. Rev. Walton was thus following the Cree practice; one never asks for something for oneself. It is much more acceptable, and much more effective, to ask for something for someone else.

Cree-Missionary Relations: The Cree Side of the Story

While there is no question that the Cree of Chisasibi both feared and respected Rev. Walton, various stories of him bring out some additional dimensions of the relationship. According to one of the stories still making the rounds in Chisasibi, Rev. Walton was giving a sermon on death and afterlife. He declared that he was not afraid of death, and challenged anyone to find any evidence that he was. As usual no one challenged him. But afterwards, a Cree man noticed that Rev. Walton's house had on it a lightning rod, in fact, the only building in the whole village to have one.² In another story, Rev. Walton is again giving a sermon, and he catches a man who

²Here and elsewhere in this paper, the material from Cree informants are not given as exact quotes, but instead are re-written in grammatical English and checked back with the group. This procedure follows their request.
is almost falling asleep. The man had slumped forwards and sideways so that his head was resting almost at the end of the bench. Rev. Walton thunders and wakes up the man, intending to shame him publicly. The man, bleary-eyed, nevertheless collects himself, saying that he is not surprised that Rev. Walton thought he was falling asleep, with his head at the end of the bench. But, in fact, says the man, he was not sleeping. He was merely checking to make sure the benches were in a straight line.

Rev. Walton is widely respected by most members of his flock for explaining to the Cree white man's ways and technology. One gets the impression that white man's superior ways was one of his favourite topics. Some, however, may not have appreciated the zeal with which Rev. Walton spoke on southern ways. In one story, Rev. Walton is again expounding on the virtues of white man's technology, this time on the subject of keeping time. He has a habit of cross-examining his audience to keep them on their toes. He points to one man, "You," he says. "Tell us: which gives the true time, the sun or this?" dangling his pocket watch for the whole audience to see. After some embarrassed hesitation, the man responds. "I would say the sun," he says. "You can always change the time on your clock. But try changing the sun!"

The Cree used to make offerings to dead men. They still do. Passing by the grave of an ancestor believed to have powers over animals, a hunter might leave an offering of, say, some tobacco rolled up in tree bark. Missionaries were never comfortable with this practice. Rev. Walton once declared, "That man is dead; he can't help you. Why do you insist on doing such things?" People said afterwards that Rev. Walton was contradicting himself. He often talked about saints, why, Christ himself, all dead men, who were to be respected and to be appealed for help. So surely, appealing to dead and respected hunters was not an unreasonable thing to do for a hunter.

An even more serious problem for the missionaries, it seems, was the Cree respect for animal spirits. According to the Cree, all animals have spirits, and some animals, such as the black bear, have powers of reasoning as well. The missionaries always denied the animals these powers. One respected Cree leader of the last generation, who was a catechist himself, was once moved to remark that "Priests believe animals have no spirits. But if these priests ever walked into the woods and ran into the spirit of a bear, they would be really
scared."

While recounting traditional practices related to the showing of respect to game animals, an elderly hunter in the CTA group who was a lay priest himself volunteered that one of the missionaries in his youth used to get angry at Cree hunting rituals. The priest used to say that "You show more respect to these black bears than you show to the good Lord!"

Members of the CTA group were not reticent to indicate that missionaries were directly involved in the disappearance or near disappearance of certain cultural practices over the years. It appears that the traditional drum is no longer used in the bush camps of Chisasibi hunters. This is because the missionaries used to gather up the drums and burn them. In the hunters' recollection, of a multitude of missionaries ever to come to Chisasibi, only one had respect for hunting rituals and traditional legends. Hunters could talk to him about these things without the fear of admonishment. The others, even if they could not prohibit these beliefs, would ridicule and criticize them.

While the Cree always respected the missionaries and would never think of harming any of them deliberately, they were not above occasional mischief. Once a missionary came by when a polar bear was being butchered. Thinking of reserving a choice piece for himself, the missionary asked for the liver and duly received it. The Cree hunters know that polar bear liver, even when properly cooked to kill the parasites, is poisonous since it has too much Vitamin A in it. Nevertheless, they did not volunteer this information, but rather waited to see what would happen the next day. As it turns out, nothing did happen to the missionary, although no one would hazard a guess why.

Cree-Missionary Relations Re-Appraised

These stories offer a somewhat different perspective of Cree-missionary relationships in general, and that of Rev. Walton in particular, as compared to the available anthropological and historical accounts. Rev. Walton may have been feared and respected, but he was not the model of perfection as one may be led to believe. The story of the lightning rod would suggest that he was regarded by some Crees as a man of some contradictions. The same point could
also be made with regard to the story about making offerings to dead men. In this context, hypocrisy would be too strong a term. In any case, most Cree seem to have a high level of tolerance for contradictions between what a person says and what a person does. They regard this as universal and normal. Thus, the presence of some contradictions may have actually helped humanize Rev. Walton’s image among the Cree.

In at least two of the stories, Cree wit and wisdom gets the best of Rev. Walton’s thunder. The story of the man slumping on the pew is perhaps a classic example of Cree humour at the expense of the white man. To appreciate the story, one has to know the Cree disdain for white man’s unnatural preoccupation with geometric neatness (e.g., benches in a straight line). Assuming that Rev. Walton was astute enough to catch on that the bleary-eyed man was turning the tables on him, he must have found himself in a dilemma. He could hardly have criticized the man for doing something he no doubt did himself: checking for the straight lines. Yet as a man “not easily fooled”, he could not have let the bleary-eyed adversary get away with it, either.

The story of the sun and the watch is a classic of a different genre. It could have been a Sufi story. Rev. Walton, usually invincible, is clearly bested by the Cree wise man, in a manner not dissimilar to the besting of a worthy adversary, say a black bear, by the hunter. The direct response (if that part of the story is indeed true) does not indicate a lack of respect for the Reverend, any more than the shooting of the bear shows lack of respect for the animal. Perhaps more important regarding the moral of the story, Rev. Walton really sets himself up for that one. His air of superiority, his constant cross-examination of his audience, and his practice of stabbing his finger at people, all of which must have been extremely annoying to the Cree, leave him vulnerable to sweet revenge.

The story about offerings to dead men brings out another aspect of Cree-missionary relationships. The Cree have no objection to the existence of saints; in fact, saints make a great deal of sense to them. But they object to being treated as second-class Christians: their holymen are just as respectable. They insist on a relationship of equals; Francis and Morantz (1983) might have called it “Partners in faith”. The Cree have not relinquished their strengths, their ability to live off the land; there is a whole system of beliefs, knowledge and practice that goes with it. They are not about to abandon
this system. The story about animal spirits shows how strong Cree central beliefs are. Here, the Cree hunter and catechist draws the line: the animals and animal spirits are there in the bush no matter what the missionary says. He knows the bush and the missionary does not, in the same way Galileo knew his science and knew that he was right.

Thus, the Cree were forced to give up the ceremonial drum, and perhaps also the shaking tent. Chisasibi Cree know of it but it has not been practiced in living memory. The walking-out ceremony for toddlers was revived in the 1970s. Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, it was a religious ceremony, which it no longer is. It appears that Cree belief systems may have survived better than did the Cree material culture. Ideas could not be banned as easily as drums, as suggested in the story about the persistence of respect shown to animals. However, lacking a benchmark, it is difficult to gauge just how much of the belief system has been lost because of incompatibility with missionaries' teachings.

The Cree View of Christianity and Traditional Practice

In the discussions with the CTA group of expert hunters, I kept a log of the instances in which hunters made references to Christianity in the context of bush practices and hunting rules. The object of this was to balance the volunteered negative comments about missionaries and Christianity, with similarly volunteered positive comments. The larger question is whether the Chisasibi Cree accepted Christianity because they found it sufficiently attractive as a belief system, or whether there were other, more compelling reasons to convert. The full answer is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, but some of the comments coming from the Cree hunters are relevant to the question.

The main reason for showing respect to animals is that man and animals are related. They share the same creator, just as the Bible tells us. As one respects other persons, one respects animals.

Making an offering to an animal shows respect. It also means that the hunters are asking the animal to provide game for them. The meaning of an offering is to thank God, as in Biblical stories with sheep offerings.

On Sunday, men do not shoot with guns, do not set new traps or nets, children are not supposed to play with bows and arrows, women do not chop
wood, gather spruce boughs or sew. The wisdom in it comes from the Bible itself.

During the long winters in the bush, the older people told stories to pass the time and to educate the children. Old people did not want the kids to take the stories lightly because these legends came from a different world, from a “previous time”. Some of these legends paralleled stories in the Old Testament. Some old story tellers used to equate the two and tell them in parallel.

Traditionally, the month of December was the month of feasting or the month of getting ready for the winter. This is the month of eating and good time. People get up an appetite, eat rich food, storing energy just like some of the animals, getting ready for the really cold months ahead. In modern Cree, it is called the Christmas month.

Some of these comments give interpretations of Christianity with which the missionaries may not have been entirely comfortable. Man and animals share the same creator, agreed. But this is interpreted further to provide a brotherhood of animals and humans, an idea perhaps consistent with the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi but not with the orthodox view (White 1967). Similarly, the Cree, I believe, correctly observe that their kind of offerings (tobacco, pieces of meat into the fire) follows the same basic idea as Biblical sheep offerings. Yet the missionaries, with some exceptions, ridiculed Cree offerings and rituals. This must have been confusing to the Cree who interpret the Christian prayer before the meal as an offering of thanks, very much in the same spirit as traditional Cree offerings. The missionaries were contradicting themselves.

In some cases, the teachings of the two systems meshed comfortably. For example, the Cree lunar month of mikusaachiskinipisim (December) was a month of feasting anyway (mikushaan = feast). Adding the Christmas celebration to it simply made it merrier. Smith (1985) provides specific instances in which Biblical stories were used to strengthen traditional beliefs. Grant (1984:23) also suggests parallels between Christian teachings and native religion. However, in many cases, the Cree knew that the systems did not mesh very well and that their interpretation of Christianity differed from those of the missionaries. For example, what did the missionaries think of the practice of telling Cree legends and Old Testament stories in parallel? Answer: “Well (laughter) they never knew about the Old Testament being recounted in this way.”
Conclusions

The evidence reviewed above indicates that the Cree were not passive participants in their conversion process. They were not simply awe-struck observers of superior men who were the missionaries. Further, the conversion process was not without stress and tension. The evidence for this assertion is of the indirect kind. Humour is widely used by the Cree to alleviate tension. For example, a near spill while going down the rapids by canoe or any near accident or mishap is followed by much laughter. In some such way, the existence of a rich folklore of stories about missionaries, some of them evoking prolonged laughter among people who must have heard them many times before, may be related to stresses and tension between the Cree and the missionaries. Given that a religious person — and most Cree are religious — would be very reluctant to criticize missionaries, direct questions on such a topic would simply not yield this kind of evidence of tension between the two belief systems. Thus, the strength of the present study is that it relies only on material volunteered by the informants on Cree-missionary relationships, all in the context of rules of conduct in the bush. However, the weakness of the study is that there was no follow-up of the hypotheses suggested by evidence from such a narrow kind of inquiry.

In the context of indigenous Christianity, some recent work has focused on breakaway cults (Grant 1984:117). The present study suggests that the research subject of indigenous Christianity may be pursued on a broader front: native catechists and other leaders may have been developing a Cree-oriented Christian theology while working within the system. For example, the Cree actively sought to maintain a balance between Christian teachings and old Cree beliefs. The telling of Old Testament stories in parallel with Cree legends strongly suggests this. Cree leaders often stamped their own interpretations on some of the teachings of Christianity, if and when the interpretations of the missionaries clashed with the bush practice. It may be possible to argue that the Cree interpretation of the Bible may have been no less valid than that of the missionaries. It certainly was a broader interpretation than that of the missionaries, and, among other things, it provided credibility to then existing Cree practices such as making offerings. The teachings of the Bible were in a form already familiar to the Cree. Long fall and winter nights
in the bush were a time for the telling of legends and stories. Old Testament stories simply supplemented Cree legends and stories.

Nevertheless, the tensions were there. Anyone doubting this may consult Willis’ (1973) book about growing up in the Anglican Residential School at Fort George. Furthermore, tensions such as those related to burning of drums were not confined to James Bay:

A present-day reader of missionary reports is likely to be struck most forcibly by the almost complete lack of appreciation for Indian aesthetics they reveal. Huron chants were described as 'howlings' and Longhouse ceremonies as consisting of 'horrid and frightful postures', while as late as 1918 an Anglican missionary reported with satisfaction that totem poles were being cut up for firewood. (Grant 1984:222)

Cree hunters of today do not condone the burning of ceremonial drums by the missionaries. The one missionary at Chisasibi who tolerated the open discussion of Cree practices and legends is appreciated in a different way than all those others who did not. The missionaries, who had no competence in the bush, were never seen as authorities in the making of rules for the bush. In this regard, the Sunday prohibition for hunting is a curiosity. There is no evidence in Chisasibi that such a rule existed before the missionaries. Did it appeal to a deeper-rooted desire to extend the rules for social interactions to the rules governing relations between humans and animals?

Accommodating the pantheistic beliefs of the native religion into Christianity is the kind of adaptability which has served well the survival of the Cree culture. It has to be acknowledged here, however, that scholars differ on the question of survival of Cree culture. There is little argument that hunting technology and lifestyles have changed. Instead of sail canoes (until the mid-1950s) and dogteams (until the mid-1960s), Chisasibi hunters/trappers/fishermen now travel along the James Bay coast by motor-canoes and snowmobiles. But the patterns of travel are much the same. Fishermen use nylon gillnets. But these nets are wielded in much the same way as the old nets used a century ago or more. There is no evidence that fishing methods and practices have changed, with the exception that some old methods such as the use of stone weirs have been abandoned at Chisasibi (Berkes 1979). New technology is simply superimposed upon the old structure. In a similar way, one can perhaps characterize the
adoption of Christianity. Even though the people are Christians, the old rules of conduct in bush life are still recognizable underneath. This is, of course, not in reference to all aspects of life but simply bush life, and for those people to whom bush life is still important.

REFERENCES

Berkes, Fikret
1979 An Investigation of Cree Indian Domestic Fisheries in Northern Quebec. *Arctic* 32:46–70

Bishop, Charles A.

Désy, Pierette

Feit, Harvey A.

Francis, Daniel, and Toby Morantz

Grant, J.W.

Hyman, J.

Scott, Colin H.
Smith, Nicholas N.

Tanner, Adrian

White, Lynn, Jr.

Willis, Jane