Both missionaries and researchers in the Eastern Subarctic region have wondered how the effects of missionary words and deeds were received within traditional convictions regarding the moral essentials of personal relationships. That is, we may wonder how deeply people took Christian precepts to heart, how these teachings were reinterpreted to accommodate them to a Cree idiom of experience, and to what extent these religious activities had consequences in Cree people’s lives.

This paper aims to make sense of religious continuity and change. But dealing adequately with this sensitive and complex subject requires that we ask what is at stake. The blending of religious traditions is a topic with vast historical and comparative dimensions, and requires careful definitions of basic terms and concepts. Can we speak fairly of James Bay Cree traditional religion only in terms of beliefs in spirits? If we were describing the syncretic origins of Christianity from Hebrew, Greek and other traditions, would we speak only of spirits? Can we speak fairly of missionary Christianity of the 19th and 20th century only in terms of the missionaries’ beliefs in spirits? No.

Why is it necessary to ask these questions, as if spiritual qualities can reasonably be seen to only be entities external to, and erroneously imagined by, a religious Cree or missionary? The question takes as given that there is a credible position that holds that spirituality must, always and only, be imagined to exist outside of human persons, as kinds of other-than-human or even supreme beings. And, this perspective implies, the missionary differs from his flock only in his conviction that all kinds of imputed supernatural beings are inauthentic except the one God of his own tradition. If we accept this, we must limit ourselves to discourse either about God or about figments of human error, or both. In addition, we can study the outward forms, or behavioural manifestations of beliefs in these
beings, under the heading of “ritual practices”. But where does this lead? What are we trying to discover? Is the goal simply to describe odd beliefs and behaviours?

Surely there is more at stake than disagreeing over the authenticity of mystically perceived spirit persons and associated rituals, and our argument will benefit by defining religion more broadly. That is, I think that it is reasonable and useful to regard the domain of religion in terms that both the missionaries (or at least some of them) and the Crees (or at least some of them) would find more acceptable. So we must criticize the Frazerian definition of religion as “a belief in spirits” as a partial, and therefore distorted view. We can remedy this distortion by expanding the meaning of “spirit” to include a more plausible, and less exotic set of meanings, including reference to a notion of “the spirit of a people”, to a notion of a “spirit of community,” and to a notion of any given person’s subjective “spiritual” condition, whether it is shown in “a spirit of friendship,” or “a state of spiritual disharmony,” or “an experience of spiritual awakening,” or a “person with a creative spirit” and so on. Properly speaking, spirit refers quite generally to the moral qualities or conditions of inter-personal relationships, including Hallowell’s (1955:178ff) category of “other-than-human persons”, and also to intra-personal or subjective experience as it refers to the moral aspects of life. Taken this broadly, religious aspects of life and culture simply contrast with the pragmatic conditions. In sum, it is in the whole domain of moral intentions and actions of persons vis-a-vis other persons that the term “spirit” has any very convincing meaning, and that religious convictions have their reality. The designation and characterizing of a spirit-person called God, or of other spiritual entities, is simply a special case, a conspicuous part, within this larger domain.

If we can share this willing suspension of secular humanist disbelief regarding spirit for a few minutes, we can get on to our inquiry into how the teachings of Christian missionaries were accepted, understood, and embodied in action by the James Bay Cree.

We have our best early assessment of acceptance, understanding, and actions from John Horden at Moose Factory, who reports in honest detail the frustrations he finds, in that people listen with great interest, but seem not to retain his words or their meaning. Like Barnley before him, and like the Reverend E.A. Watkins (missionary at Fort George from 1852 to 1857), Horden was initially frustrated by the Indians’ seeming forgetfulness or misunderstanding of his teachings. After five years his — and the Indians’ — initial frustrations are no longer mentioned. It could be argued that Horden simply reconciled himself to this problem and stopped mentioning it. It seems more likely, however, that the problems caused by this missionary’s initial inability to speak the language were overcome as he began to under-
stand their cultural and linguistic patterns. Horden wrote: "many of my people [are] in possession of a great part of my morning's discourse which they said they felt very much in their hearts, but were sorry they could not remember more than what they did." On another occasion he read the 119th Psalm to several Indians who had never attended a Cree church service. They paid him great attention but, when asked if they understood what they heard, replied, "Aa, kinistitotatin nama maga nkaginahacipan [Yes, I understand you but I shall not be able to retain it.]" Wamistikoos' son read and re-read his syllabic book, but could not understand the words "Messiah" and "Hallelujah". (Long 1986:125-127).

Horden saw the mission work as bringing people to the Church, and instructing them in reading and writing (letter of 14 July 83, in Scanlon 1976:18). He very substantially realized these goals, and reports in 1883 that "Both (the English and the Indian) are intelligent congregations, scarcely an adult of either being unable to read his Prayer Book in his own language" (Scanlon 1976:7). Walton reports from Fort George the enthusiasm for books and that people repeated the words regularly and with satisfaction:

To see the crowds of men and women (mostly men as a rule) coming to church on a week day evening is indeed most encouraging.
I made 300 prayer and hymn books for them so that they were soon able to join in the prayers and singing for the first time really since they have had a minister. They surprised us at the way they got on with their . . . and they long for a time to come when they will be able to have the "Word of God" in their own language.
Sometimes — when I have been out late at night to see a sick person, I can stand outside a tent and listen to the Indians singing their evening hymn and having prayers, but their one great difficulty is that they can not understand their Testament. Even such a simple text as "If you love me, keep my commandment" (Jo. xiv.) is all dark to them. I have printed a lot of short addresses and interlaced them with full page scripture pictures and these have been carefully distributed among them, so that every tent shall have one.
In this way we hope to help our poor people to know about God and His love. They do so appreciate all this but complain that their books are soon used up because the young people are for ever working at them. I shall never forget the Sunday after I had given them the books.
One could hardly realize it was the same people in church.
I was told after the service that now we had "some thunder in our church."
(Walton 1903:mss. letters, 1901-05)

Clearly, books were prized — perhaps even loved — and were read and re-read. But as we all know from personal experience, it is one thing to read with fluency, and another to understand. And as the ethnographers among us will know from personal experience, it is one thing to soujourn in another
culture, and another to understand the culture with depth. How deeply did Horden or Walton understand Cree culture when they translated scripture into Cree syllabic texts? Or specifically, how deeply did they understand Cree spirituality? And on the other side of the cultural equation, how deeply did the Crees understand Horden’s and Walton’s spirituality? For both sides, the answer is, probably with considerable sympathy, but with limited intellectual comprehension.

I suspect that the basis of syncretic action was the willingness to accept that the other culture had access to some mysterious power through the use of esoteric, perhaps emotionally mnemonic words. On the Cree side, there was an excellent basis for this in their own traditional songs and stories (Preston 1975). This does not lead us to say that the Crees would perceive Christian services as empty ritualist performances, but rather that their modes of understanding the services and texts were imbedded more in the heart than in the mind. For the Catholic missionary accustomed to using the Latin liturgy, this might be exactly what was desired and expected (as, indeed, it has apparently tended to be elsewhere in the Catholic empire). But for the Anglicans like Horden and Walton, the goal was more intellectual.

I suggest that the difficulty people had in retaining what they heard from Horden or Walton or others may have been a particularly complex problem of translation, stemming not only from difficulty with translation between the structure and semantics of the languages used, but additionally from a difference in the mode of thinking, or the idiom of experience that is only partly indicated in words. The Bible, hymns, and sermons are words set in a mode of moral proclamation (Frye 1982) and/or, in the terminology of a more cynical perspective, phatic communication (LaBarre 1972) that would be capable of making a strong impression, yet with little precisely grasped content, unless one had a comparable personal-spiritual idiom of experience that could be drawn upon for these intuited meanings.

For most individuals, Native or white, without a deeply matured spiritual basis of interpretation, most mission teachings would, almost of necessity, be compartmentalized away from most of life’s experiences as a kind of impressive but incomprehensible proclamation about a realm of the supernatural. This impediment is not singular to Crees or more generally to Natives, but characterizes all humans who seek a deeper understanding of the moral implications of existence. It is characterized within the Synoptic Gospels by Simon Peter’s chronic (and sometimes tragi-comic) failures to understand and believe. Perhaps some form of compartmentalization was not only possible but necessary for Cree hunters, whose experience of spiritual communion was cast in metaphors that were for the most part personalized symbols of moral relationships to the animals they hunted for
their food.

But some Crees went more deeply into spiritual seeking, and it need not surprise us that some of these shamans and some other men became more at ease with the missionary's words, and became similarly easy in deriving some satisfying meanings. For a single example, James McKenzie reports some Naskapi folk wisdom from the late 1700s or early 1800s.

Some years ago, a priest wishing to explain to one of those Indians the principles of religion, among other important tenets, told him that in God there were three different persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy-Ghost, and, yet, that these three different Persons were in reality the same and made but one. The Indian, struck with this seeming paradox, begged the Reverend Father to explain his meaning more clearly, for he could not conceive how the son could be as old as the father. The priest, taken off his guard by the unexpected objection, said it was a mystery in his religion which he was bound to believe without thoroughly understanding it. "Well," said the man of Nature, "since you have not sense enough to explain the doctrine you advance, I shall offer you my opinion on it," on which, folding the skirt of his capot in three, he said: "Look Patriarche" — so they call the priest — "these three folds of caribou are different in number but the same in size, quality and age, yet, you see," pulling them asunder, "they make in reality but one." (MacKenzie 1808:419-420)

So it need not surprise us to find that, at least into the 1960s on the East Coast of James Bay, some native Anglican catechists also were notable as traditional Cree shamans. Here, among these few men, the dynamics of syncretism must have been particularly intense. Some others who assessed the Christian idiom favourably may have rejected much of the Cree idiom, like Horden's student and colleague, Thomas Vincent. Vincent's Christian convictions were very visibly extended with moral force, even coercion, in his everyday relations with both Cree and Europeans (Long 1986). Others were more open to accommodation of spiritual elements of both cultures.

Sam Iserhoff, an Anglican catechist, continued to cherish the values expressed in the atiukanak, but commented that in those days, every man was afraid of every other man (personal communication). The late Malcolm Diamond, a traditional leader, rose in church when the Anglican priest was warning people not to go to the Catholic priest's services, and admonished him that the Bible tells us to love our neighbours. And much of Cree traditional spirituality simply persisted within the mission context, as evidenced by a young priest's concern when he discovered, in the mid-1960s, that the catechists trained by Walton were including with baptism the power to protect the future against any effects of sorcery (DeHoop, personal communication). Walton's shadow reaches far, but not everywhere.

Now to an interpretation of events that I regard as a particularly dynamic case of syncretism, with enduring effects on the James Bay Cree.
As we heard from Jennifer Brown a few years ago (Brown 1982), in 1842, about 500 kilometers to the northwest of James Bay, a Fort Severn region Indian named Abishabis assumed the name of “Jesus”, and in companionship with another man who called himself Wasitay or “Shining Light” prophesied the imminent arrival of a new society within a bountiful environment. This became a religious movement that deeply affected people over a large area. Part of the teaching of the new religion was the rejection of the powagan persons, traditional spirits whose powers were central to the conjuror’s world.

James Evans, working at Norway House and York Factory in the 1840s, unwittingly provided Wasitay and/or Abishabis with more than a belief in the possibility of their individual salvation. With his innovation of the syllabic alphabet, which he used to make printed representations of hymns and prayers, he gave them the medium for giving tangible, enduring, and transmittable form to their prophecy of a collective salvation. Hudson’s Bay Company trader’s reports show ignorance of Evans’s writing system; what is expressed is considerable alarm. Hunters near Severn were said to be ignoring the fall goose hunt, starving in their tents, staring at their song boards and singing endlessly, rather than hunting for their living. One case is reported of an Albany Indian who “depended on the Charts that he had in his possession, of the roads leading to heaven (and to hell for all his wants). Of these unmeaning scratches — traced on wood or paper — . . . he did not cease to look from the moment he pitched his tent in the fall to the hour of his death” (HBCA B.3/a/149, fo. 30, cited in Brown 1982:54).

This revitalistic movement, incorporating song boards and the expectation of a great light is a dramatic case of the processes of symbolic formulation, producing a syncretism of what they understood from Evans and some of the Cree traditional images and convictions they already knew. I find convincing proof that syncretism is the basis of the movement in the “bad spirit” condemnation of the (traditional ancestors) powaganak, and in the song boards (Long 1986:180–189, 191, 194) — both too radical a change and too similar to the Christian mission message to be simply the intracultural innovations of an indigenous mysticism. And the contemporary versions of the story are further proof of syncretism. Here is an excerpt from a contemporary Cree account collected by John Long:

And they never forgot the great scene they saw and heard. They remembered what they were told would happen in the future. They were amazed when he called himself Wasitay (shining light). And also when he talked about Jesus.

So that is when religion started. It was then that the Indians began to realize that there was someone that was in charge of everything in the whole world.
It was said that later on that winter, a Priest came to them. And the two shining lights they had seen — they thought they were Angels, when the Priest told them about Jesus and the Angels, and also taught them about religion. . . It is said they thought it was planned by the work of God, so that the people would know that, in the future, there is another life. They thought of that right away, when they saw the Priest. (Long 1988.)

Some explanatory basis for this example of syncretism may be found in the correspondences 1) between the styles of word use in Cree songs and Christian hymns, and 2) between the expressions of hope in songs and in hymns and prayers, the latter being explicated by the missionaries in their readings from the Bible, claimed as the words of God. A third type of correspondence can be seen in the moral precepts and actions.

In the first case, the stylistic use of words, there are close-grained correspondences between Cree songs and Christian hymns. The characteristic use of tone and rhythm sets these communications apart from ordinary discourse, signalling their special intent. And the repetition of the few words of songs heightens their mnemonic effect on the singer's imagery, perhaps comparable to the heightening effect of singing hymns in unison. While the hymns have many more words, the images or feelings evoked by the words may be comparably stereotypic.

In the second case, songs or hymns are not merely sung about someone, but are actively communicating a deeply felt hope to the someone (Preston 1975:206-220). And the someone may respond with tangible benefits as hoped (but not promised) in the nature of the spiritual relationship. The words are revealed first in a spiritual setting, a dream or vision, or in a church service or in the Bible, and their subsequent use reaffirms the relationship.

It seems likely that there were also some essential congruences between old beliefs and missionary ideals regarding moral precepts and actions, including the “to look after” ethic for leadership, a traditional value through which people are enjoined to be sensitive to the needs of others, and to try to help others. For both missionary and Cree, this social communion, or community, was the basis of people being able to live well together. Some more specific correspondences in the morality of relationships may be found in the characteristic intentions and practice of religious specialists, especially in the case of catechists, and also in more ordinary intra-group relations.

Correspondences between the characteristics of spiritual specialists may be seen in the mediation of conjurors, catechists and priests with the spiritual realm (but with different perceptions of spirits), in prophecy, protection and healing, and in casting out of evil spirits.

We are certain that the Crees valued highly the services of priests or ministers in baptism and dying, among other rituals that have some en-
during hopes built into them. To die unbaptized was a calamity. And the threat of burning in hell was not unrecognized by those who traditionally burnt the remains of monstrous persons, including, it is said, the body of Abishabis, who, after repeated and unconscionable exploitation of others, murdered a Cree family and stole their goods, and about a month later was himself killed, and his remains burned.

The Christian vision, which was based on new, tangible, powerfully spiritual songs and the expectation of a new society to come, was incorporated with great seriousness by most of the James Bay Crees. What Horden and Walton did on the South and East Coasts by persuasion, leading people into Anglican Christianity, was partly accomplished for Catholicism, during a period of great hardship in the Attawapiskat-Winisk region, by Abishabis and Wasitay, drawing charismatically on the resources provided by Evans. Perhaps it was this additional syncretic preparation that accounts for the greater degree of replacement of some the traditional spiritual relationships by Catholic Christianity on the West Coast of James Bay.

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