

*Does religion play a major
role in formal education in
New France?*

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My research paper is on early education in New France. Formalized education first became prominent in the 17th century. Religion is the foundation of all formal education in the New France. Figures like Marie de L'Incarnation and the Jesuits had religious motivations to start educating others. Although the religious leaders from France wanted to teach others their ways, the Indigenous people had their own ways of education. The Nuns and Jesuits aimed to convert the Indigenous people of New France. Their actions to assimilate the Indigenous people were not always humane, or practical. Jesuits took to trying to learn about the Indigenous people before seeing how to best educate them about their religion. The religious formal education the in New France helped to shape what formal education is today.

The 17th century marked the beginning of formalized education becoming more prominent in New France.¹ “One thing that did not change during this period, and indeed may have been strengthened by events, was church control of education.”² The Catholic Church continued to assert their presence in the school houses throughout New France. The catholic church established, operated, financed and staffed the schools.³ The missionaries, nuns, and Jesuits saw it as their mission to educate children about the teachings of god. Their lives were centered around their faith, and they wanted to teach their religious ways to others.

Marie de L'Incarnation was an Ursuline nun from France. The Jesuits and their ways of educating people in New France was motivated by their profound belief in religion.⁴ Marie's religion influenced her perspective. The time period also had an impact on Marie's perspective because religion was very strictly pushed in this time. Marie write letters to relay the progress of

¹ Magnunson Roger, *Education in New France* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 4-5.

² Magnunson, *Education in New France*, 5.

³ Magnunson, 5.

⁴ De L'Incarnation, Marie; Marshall, Joyce, *Word From New France*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 68-73.

New France. Marie's main priority always relates back to religion. The only thing that Marie wanted to educate was religion. Over everything Maire wanted religion to be number one. Marie believed so strongly in a faith that she let it lead her life. "More than five hundred, including both Hurons and Montagnais, have been baptized this year. I beseech you to pray for the conversion of the others, who are in very great numbers, since there are almost infinite nations that do not know Jesus Christ."⁵ Over everything Maire wanted religion to be number one.

Marie was very devoted to her faith, and she wanted to share her beliefs with others. Marie's religion of Catholicism, is what motivated her to start educating others in New France. Marie was very pro religion. She wanted to portray the New world positively in her letters, and she wanted to prove that she was meeting her religious motivation to educate others of the teachings of god. "What we saw when we arrived in this new world has made us forget all our travails, for to hear divine Majesty praised in four different tongues, to see a great many savages baptized, to hear the savages themselves preaching the law of Jesus Christ to their compatriots and teaching them to praise and love our God to see them gives thanks to heaven for sending us to their barbarous country to all this I say, enough to make us forget our crosses and our weariness, had they been a thousand times greater than they were?."⁶ From Marie's perspective the Europeans were above the Indigenous people. The Indigenous people were seen as savages, and uncivilized. Marie saw her work as a nun to be successful by converting and changing the Indigenous people. Her perspective sheds a light on the on sided Canadian history through a very religious perspective.

⁵ De L'Incarnation, Marie; Marshall, Joyce, *Word From New France*, 69.

⁶ De L'Incarnation, Marie; Marshall, Joyce, 68.

The Jesuits were another clergy group who helped to establish the education system in New France. “The motivation behind the Jesuits’ decision to undertake formal schooling as one of their ministries cannot, therefore, be reduced to a simplistic formula, as Polanco’s list of the fifteen benefits conferred by the schools indicates.”⁷ The Jesuits started education in pre confederation Canada, specifically in New France, during the 17th century with underlying motives. The Jesuits wanted to start schooling for the society, the students, and locality.⁸ The Jesuits wanted to teach others as they believed they learned best from teaching others. While creating a place of education the Jesuits wanted to practice preaching and other skills needed in the Ministry.⁹ The Jesuits were motivated by their religion to start teaching others. They believed that their religion needed to be integrated into their teachings.

The religious groups from New France saw it as their mission to assimilate the Indigenous people of New France. “As a part of the efforts of the Bourbon bureaucracy and the Gallican church to build a viable French and Christian colony in North America in the seventeenth century, without at the same time “depopulating the mother country” or spending vast sums of money which could bring better returns if invested elsewhere, the education of Amerindian children was promoted with a view to “francizing” them and eventually assimilating them to the small French expatriate nucleus.”¹⁰ The religious groups took it upon themselves to help convert the Indigenous people. The religious groups were so devoted and taken by their

⁷ O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, (London, England: Harvard University Press, 1993), 212.

⁸ O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 208-226.

⁹ O’Malley, 212.

¹⁰ Barman, Jean, Yvonne Hebert, and Don McCaskill, *Indian Education in Canada Volume 1: The Legacy*, (Vancouver : UBC Press, 1986), 45.

religions that they wanted to convert Indigenous people to save them from being damned.”¹¹ The Jesuits, and nuns took it into their control to “save” the Indigenous people from damnation.

The European missionaries felt it was their duty to convert the Indigenous people in the “New World”. “Because missionaries were dedicated, self-sacrificing people who truly believed in their task, historians have tended to see them as they saw themselves: as humble servants, saving souls from savagery and damnation, all for the greater glory of God.”¹² They did not agree with the Indigenous peoples religious practices and saw them as demons. The Europeans felt as though they were doing the Indigenous people a favor by assimilating them. “Native Americans were required to become like Europeans in all aspects of life 0 in matters of sex, marriage, economy, and government, as well as religion.”¹³ The Indigenous people were to be stripped of their identities. Much of their rich cultural heritage was lost through this attempted assimilation.

Although religious leaders and groups from New France started to formalize education their views were deemed a bit harsh and odd to the Indigenous people present there. The education system in New France, highlights the push to convert Indigenous people in pre-confederation Canada to Christianity. The Indigenous peoples had their own religions and ways of life, but the missionaries were against their practices. Both parties were skeptical and did not trust one another. The author pushes the ideologies of each religion and tells us about how they clashed.¹⁴ If the Indigenous people did not push back against the attempted assimilation their

¹¹ Ronda, James P, *The William and Mary Quarterly Vol. 34, No. 1*, (Omohundro Institute of Early American, 1997), 66-82.

¹² Ronda, James P, *The William and Mary Quarterly Vol. 34, No. 1*, 66.

¹³ Ronda, James P, 67.

¹⁴ Ronda, James P, 68.

entire religion and way of life may have been eliminated. The Indigenous peoples had their own religion and their own practices. The Europeans did not agree with the Indigenous peoples traditional practices. “Missionaries who observed such healing rituals uniformly condemned them.”¹⁵ The missionaries felt that the more the Indigenous people practiced their own rights and rituals they still posed power to resist their efforts. The Protestant and Catholic missionaries did not allow their converts to participate in any form of these ancient healing acts.

The Jesuits took to getting to get to know their learners.¹⁶ They tried to overthrow Indigenous elders, and slowly started to produce Euro-Catholic subjectivities to their students.¹⁷ They attempted to use pedagogical techniques to undermine, and discredit Indigenous beliefs and teachings.¹⁸ The Jesuits really believed that their religion was superior to Indigenous teachings, and ways of life. They attempted to convert, assimilate the Indigenous people. They were also undermining the Indigenous peoples religions as they did not deem it as important as their own religion. Although they tried to get to know their learners, they did not have good intentions with their new found knowledge of the Indigenous people.

Religion and faith is a dominant and recurring theme when looking at education in New France. Most of the motivation to start educating others comes from the religious roots of the European nuns and Jesuits, whose beliefs were so strong that it was the center of their lives, and education. They felt so strongly about their faith that it was incorporated into this “new world”.

¹⁵ Ronda, James P, 73.

¹⁶ Welton, Michael, *Cunning Pedagogics: The Encounter Between The Jesuit Missionaries And Amerindians in 17th-Century New France*, (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, 2005), 101-115.

¹⁷ Welton, Michael, *Cunning Pedagogics: The Encounter Between The Jesuit Missionaries And Amerindians in 17th-Century New France*, 101.

¹⁸ Welton, Michael, 102.

Their mind sets were so one sided that they were not willing or open to learn about Indigenous peoples ways of life. They tried to convert multiple people and resorted to violent means to convert them. Although they did it with good intentions it is a major scar in Canada's history. Not only does religion play a major role in education in New France, but it shapes the beginnings and foundation of education today.

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