

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Faithful, George, "Uprooting Where Others Sowed? Presbyterian and Moravian Missionaries in Russian Orthodox Alaska" (2013). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 321.
<http://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/321>

George Faithful

Uprooting Where Others Sowed?

Presbyterians and Moravians in Russian Orthodox Alaska

At the northern edge of the world, against the odds, many families, clans, and tribes made their home. They worshipped the Creator; or maybe they were godless heathens. The White Man came from the west, bringing knowledge of God; or perhaps he merely brought superstition. Then more white men came from the east. They brought destruction; they called it “civilization.”

The arrival in Native Alaskan communities of Russians in the mid-18th century and Americans in the mid-19th century brought lasting change. What that change constituted is a matter of debate. This paper will attempt to look at multiple sides of the story, considering the perspectives of Russians and Americans, and, most importantly, that of the indigenous Alaskans themselves, as well as that of ethno-historians. By disentangling the layers of polemic and hagiography left by Presbyterian and Moravian missionaries, I will demonstrate their corrosive impact at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century on the cultures and communities of Native Alaskan converts to Russian Orthodoxy. I will further demonstrate that this destruction countered the significant if not normative precedents in Presbyterian and Moravian missions for honoring Native cultures as one of the marks of a successful mission.

I wish I could come before you today to present my findings after years of archival research in Russian, Aleut, and half-a-dozen other Native languages, to say nothing of on-site fieldwork. (My time in Alaska was as a child in Anchorage and Fairbanks, not on the coastal fringe where Russian Orthodoxy took root.) I am deeply indebted to the work of others, both in producing secondary literature and in making primary sources available in English, most notably

Michael Oleksa, who has done a good deal of both. What I do hope to offer is a concise but thorough comparison of material in a variety of sub-fields and sub-traditions, a macroscopic approach to the issue of Protestant missions in Orthodox Alaska which I have not seen elsewhere. Current literature tends to be more concerned with Christian denominations in Alaska individually, rather than with their interrelationships and conflicts.

A lasting Russian presence in Alaska began in the 1740s, at the beginning of the Fur Rush, which continued until the end of the 18th century. This was both an extension of the existing fur trade in the Russian Far East and an expression of Russia's growing international economic and political ambitions. The Russian fur traders treated Native Alaskans similarly to the indigenous peoples they had encountered in Siberia: that is, with a mixture of holy kindness and vengeful hostility, depending on the individuals involved. As per the norms of Russian Orthodoxy, laymen frequently proselytized and baptized the Native peoples they encountered.

When later monks and priests arrived in Alaska, they found a small but significant number of Alaska Natives who were already converts. The relationship between godparent and godson or goddaughter was often close and mutually beneficial, resulting in many hunting partnerships, for example. A significant number of the Russian men took Native women as common-law wives, marriages in many cases later sanctified by priests. Their children formed the heart of the creole class, a technical designation denoting a social group of cultural mediators between the Russians and Alaskan Natives. Some creoles were racially mixed, while others were full-blood Natives.

Because the Russians hugged the coastline in their explorations and rarely ventured far inland, their contact was restricted to the coastal tribes: the Aleuts, the Sugpiak or Alutiiq, the Dena'ina, the Ahtna, the Yupik, and the Tlingit. Not all Russian-Native contact was positive. For

instance, after Unangan warriors killed some of Ivan Solov'ev's comrades for desecrating their sacred land, he retaliated by killing much of the Unangan population of Fox Island and destroying all of its inhabitants hunting gear, making them unable to provide their own food for the winter and subsequently beholden to their Russian occupiers. In another case, the Sugpiaq of Kodiak Island served Russian colonists as slaves for an extended period.

The first formal missionaries to Alaska, Russians Orthodox monks began living among the Sugpiaq of Kodiak Island in 1794. Their methods varied little from those employed by the Greek monks who converted the first Russians to Orthodoxy; indeed, they had no other paradigm for mission, given that they were the first Russian Orthodox overseas missionaries in the modern era, apart from a brief mission to China initiated by Peter the Great in 1721. (The reason for the previous dearth of missions lies in the Russian Church's siege mentality after long centuries of invasions from the east.)

The monks quickly took the side of the Natives against the exploitation of the Russian fur traders, from whom the monks had learned of Alaska in the first place and from whom the Natives had first learned of Orthodoxy. Over several generations, monks converted several tribes to Orthodoxy, which is to say that they converted isolated individuals at first, then families, with mass conversions occurring only in the early American period. The conversion process consisted of the transformation of Native culture in many regards and the preservation of Native culture in others. For example, Innocent Veniaminov introduced literacy to the Aleuts, devising a distinctive alphabet for them in the process. The Orthodox mission persuaded both individuals and communities to convert, leaving Native culture as intact as possible.

The early saints in Russian Alaska were visionary and wise men, but they were few. It would be a mistake to perceive the Russian mission as one of consistent, open-minded

generosity, though certainly many of the monks and priests themselves were open-minded and generous. There were others who were permissive, dismissive, or otherwise ill-suited to the rigors of life in the wildness of the Alaskan frontier. The mission itself was understaffed and underfunded throughout its history. There were never more than a few dozen priests roaming from village to village. Only once competition with American Protestant missionaries intensified did supporting Russian missionaries become a greater priority for church leaders in Moscow.

In contrast to their Orthodox counterparts, Protestant missionaries attempted to change Native culture as much as possible, molding indigenous Alaskans in their own image after the region passed into United States control in 1867. Due to both their prominence in missionary work in Alaska and to their previous history in missions to indigenous peoples, this presentation will limit its discussion of Protestant missionaries to Presbyterians and Moravians. There were certainly others: Baptists, Episcopalians, and Methodists, to name a few. Protestant mission agencies collaborated with one another to minimize geographical overlap, so as to collectively encompass the whole of Alaska, including those areas where Orthodoxy was strongest. Presbyterians and Moravians' dismissive attitudes toward Native culture contrasted with both their Orthodox contemporaries and with their forebears in their own respective traditions. Missionaries from both denominations began to reach out to tribes that ranged from solidly to nominally Russian Orthodox, some of whom remain in the fold today. Catholic missionaries, by contrast, focused their efforts on the unreached peoples in Alaska's vast inland regions.

Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson began work in Alaska in 1877. In 1885, after he personally beseeched congress for educational aid for the new territory, the federal government appointed him Alaska's General Agent of Education, a role in which he served until 1906. In that capacity, he recruited missionaries from a wide variety of Protestant denominations to run

schools and orphanages, all federally funded. Among them were Moravians, who established Bethel, which quickly became southwest Alaska's largest settlement. The first priority was to teach the indigenous peoples how to be good Christians. In the process, they needed to learn how to speak English. With funding from the federal government and backed by a staunch lobbyist in Washington, who was himself a former missionary, missionaries established schools, especially boarding schools, for Native children, some but not all of whom were orphans.

Teachers did not merely fail to teach Native culture; that would be understandable, given their ignorance of it. They punished the use of Native language by students, thereby instilling in many of them an attitude of shame and ambivalence toward their own heritage. The students of these boarding schools often internalized and perpetuated this approach, forbidding the speaking of their tribe's language in their own children, so as to spare them any possible reprisals.

This top-down, paternalistic approach differed markedly from what Presbyterian missionaries had found to be most effective among the Nez Perce and Lakota in the northern plains in the late 19th century. In that context, Presbyterian missionaries quickly realized that it was Native converts themselves who served as the most effective evangelists. They spoke the language and knew the culture. There was room for the Gospel to become incarnate in Native culture, leaving the Nez Perce and Lakota leaders themselves to decide what elements of their indigenous traditions were compatible with Christian teaching.

This contrast highlights the skewed priorities of the Presbyterian mission to Native Alaskans. Were proselytization the sole priority, there were more effective means. But because of an overwhelming desire to conquer Russian Alaska and Native Alaska culturally for America, missionaries became complicit in the broader European-American drive to Americanize all those

in Alaska. It was not enough for them to be Christians. They had to be English-speaking Protestants.

The Reverend S. Hall Young, Jackson's fellow Presbyterian and lobbyist in Washington for the cause of civilizing and Americanizing Alaskan Natives, captured the dominant Protestant attitude well: "the task of making an English-speaking race of these Natives [is] much easier than the task of making a civilized and Christian language out of the Native languages. We should let the old tongues with their superstitions and sin die – the sooner the better – and replace these languages with that of Christian civilization, and compel the Natives in our schools to speak English and English only."

In the mid-18th century, Moravian missionaries approached their evangelization among Native Americans with greater zeal than did their Protestant contemporaries, who added this as another reason to disdain them. Indeed, in contrast to other sects, Moravians settled in the New World not to flee persecution but to spread their brand of the Gospel. In their earlier proselytization efforts, they tended to affirm the continuation of Native customs and even some religious practices, such as an emphasis on the interpretation of dreams. Church unity was also central to the Moravian vision, making them likely partners in mission and unlikely opponents to Russian Orthodoxy.

When Moravian missionaries first converted Native-Americans to Christianity, their original *modus operandi* included helping them form their own villages. This was ostensibly for the Native Christians' own protection. The Native Christians would, in theory, be less prone to be targeted by anti-Native settlers, as well as be insulated from the practices of their tribesmen which were inimical to Christianity. In practice, this resulted in disaster. Moravians established a village for Native converts named Gnadenhütten, meaning "huts of grace," in eastern

Pennsylvania in 1746; its residents were massacred in the French and Indian War nine years later. Moravians subsequently established another village of the same name for Native converts in eastern Ohio; in 1782, after a white militia seeking revenge became confused as to which group of Native-Americans had attacked them, its residents were also massacred. (Dear 18th century Moravian missionaries, if someone asks about the Huts of Grace Massacre and you have to respond, “Which one?” there may be a fundamental problem with your approach to helping Native-American Christians.)

The fault of the Moravians was not one of flawed intentions, but rather one of flawed results. This remained the case to a large extent in Alaska. Moravian Missionaries in late 19th-century Alaska participated in the enterprise of Americanizing the Natives with the best of intentions. Moravian missionaries were especially concerned with meeting the physical and educational needs of the communities in which they served. Along the Kuskokwim River on the west-central coast of Alaska, they established Bethel. There were a significant number of orphans. As in many Arctic cultures, it was acceptable in the Yupik culture to abandon unwanted infants, leaving them to die of exposure. Moravian missionaries stepped in as foster parents. By affirming the value of human life, Moravian missionaries affirmed the value of the lives of all Native Alaskans. Moravian missionaries rendered an invaluable service to the communities in which they served.

Yet the Moravians’ presence was not unproblematic. Despite the triumphalistic reflections they wrote about their endeavors there, Moravian missionaries undermined the culture of those Native Alaskans whose lives and souls they sought to save. Moravian boarding schools were not exempt from the same issues that plagued boarding schools for Native-Americans elsewhere. Many Moravian missionaries stressed the same cultural education demanded by all

Protestant missionaries of Native Alaskans: how to clean themselves, how to cut their hair, and how to live in proper single-family houses. There were, however, notable exceptions, such as Ella Mae Ervin Romig, who flaunted rules about decorum, herself wearing Native clothing, allowing her own son's hair to grow long in the traditional Native fashion, and enjoying a Native diet.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the onslaught of American Protestants, Native Alaskans converted to Russian Orthodoxy in record numbers in the early American period. That era saw the conversion of entire tribes. By the sale of Alaska to the U.S. in 1867, Russian Orthodoxy had already been a presence in Alaska for over a century. Whatever air of foreignness it may have once held for the Natives, it seemed a veritable part of Native tradition when Americans began arriving. Orthodox and Native customs had been sufficiently integrated in some communities that they were and have remained inseparable. Most Aleuts, Alutiiq, Tlingit, and Dena'ina saw themselves as Orthodox Christians by the end of the 19th century.

There was much in the Orthodox worldview that lent itself to Native Alaskans. Much of what Western, that is American, culture represented was as antithetical to Native culture as it was to Orthodoxy Christianity: individualism, the pursuit of possessions, and an unsacramental view of the natural world. Orthodox Russians in Alaska shared with the Natives they encountered an understanding that faith was a matter of communal experience, that there achievement of the individual was worthless apart from the achievement of the community, and that participation in the natural world was participation in the supernatural. This is not to say that these have never been elements in the Reformed or Moravian traditions, but these elements had been effectively subsumed beneath the project of Manifest Destiny in American Alaska.

Presbyterian and Moravian missionaries appear to have been as consumed with civilizing citizens for America as with winning souls for Christ,

Orthodox Russians presented themselves to Native Alaskans as those who possessed a greater version of a truth which the Native Alaskans had already glimpsed in part. Many Native Alaskans, in turn, came to embrace Russian Orthodoxy as the fulfillment of their traditional beliefs. Russian Orthodox liturgy could occupy a space alongside other rituals. In turn, Russian Orthodox priests encouraged Native communities to retain whatever customs they possessed that were not in conflict with Christianity. Priests tolerated husbands with multiple wives when the marriages had occurred before the baptisms of their participants. Traditional Native midwinter festivals ceremonies became infused with Orthodox liturgy. Native Alaskans understood that ritual masks were windows into the world of the supernatural. As a result, they were able to embrace icons, which also provided a vision of the supernatural, albeit a more systematic one. Indeed, the division of the world into sacred and secular was as foreign to the Native Alaskans as it was to the Russian monks who guided them in faith.

Native and mixed or creole priests came to occupy a significant role in spreading and strengthening Russian Orthodoxy in Native Alaskan communities. Because of the shortage of priests, outmanned and under-funded in comparison to their Protestant competition, the laity also took on a prominent role in perpetuating Russian Orthodoxy among Native Alaskans. Especially after the Russian Revolution in 1917, Orthodoxy Alaskans were isolated from virtually all forms of support from Moscow and, indeed, from most forms of support elsewhere. Largely confined to immigrant communities, few Russian Orthodox Christians in the United States were aware of their Alaskan brothers and sisters in faith until relatively recently.

Native Alaskans perceived Russian Orthodoxy as a bastion against Western ideals and practices. By the end of the 19th century, they embraced Orthodoxy as a definitive Native religion and way of life. There had been no time in living memory without the presence of Orthodoxy. In some cases, to the disappointment of ethno-historians, Orthodox influence on the transmission of Native myths and legends was such that some original Native creation accounts have been lost, the extant versions all bearing the influence of the Genesis account. Orthodoxy effaced some aspects of Native culture, even as it preserved others.

The Native reception of Christianity was complex. Natives' motivations varied and there is no one-size-fits-all account, much less a normative conversion narrative for individuals or for communities. After the arrival of Protestant missionaries, many Native communities took advantage of the services offered by all those involved. The Presbyterians might offer better medical care, but the Orthodox priests might offer funerals that included elements of traditional Native ceremonies. Some Native Alaskans played the priests and missionaries off of each other to their own advantage.

The late 19th- and early 20th-century Presbyterian and Moravian missions claimed to be successes, especially pointing to the schools they established as beacons of truth and sources of civilization for the uncivilized. In fact, they destroyed significant aspects of Native culture, including language, due in large measure to the kinds of schooling they enforced. Their efforts had as much to do with Anglo-America's cultural expansion as with the spread of the Gospel.

The long history of conflict between Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries has revealed significant aspects of the theology and praxis of the confessions involved. The same holds true for the less well known competition between Anglo-American Protestants and Russian Orthodox Christians in late 19th- and early 20th-century Alaska. Their divergent approaches to

evangelization revealed cultural openness on the part of the Russian missionaries, however understaffed and underfunded, and revealed Anglo-American imperialism, however well intentioned, on the part of their Protestant competitors.