THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN NEW FRANCE

Cornelius J. Jaenen

Canadian Historical Association

Société Historique du Canada

HISTORICAL BOOKLET No. 40
THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN NEW FRANCE

Cornelius J. Jaenen

ISBN 0-88798-107-0 Historical Booklets
ISSN 0068-886X Historical Booklets (Print)
ISSN 1715-8621 Historical Booklets (Online)

Ottawa, 1985

CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
HISTORICAL BOOKLET No. 40
Cornelius John Jaenen was born at Cannington Manor, Saskatchewan, and received his early education in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. His undergraduate degrees in Arts and Education were obtained at the University of Manitoba and the Université de Bordeaux. His doctoral work at the University of Ottawa dealt with church-state relations in New France. He has taught at all levels of public education from a one-room rural elementary school to high school, a private boys’ school, overseas, and all three levels of university work. His university teaching career has centred on Memorial University of Newfoundland, United College (University of Winnipeg), and since 1967 at the University of Ottawa. Much in demand as a public speaker, he has taught courses at Manitoba, British Columbia, Laval, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and was Visiting Professor at the Université de Nantes, the University of Delhi, and the University of Alberta.

His *Role of the Church in New France* (1976) is as widely known as his *Friend and Foe* (1976), dealing with early French-Amerindian relations, which won him the book prize of the French Colonial Historical Society and the Sainte-Marie Prize in Canadian History. He has published over fifty articles in learned journals and historical collections on New France, native peoples, educational history, and ethnic studies. He was a founder and first president of the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association and has held top executive posts in the Manitoba Historical Society, the Society for French Historical Studies, and the French Colonial Historical Society.
THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN NEW FRANCE

Nowadays, a church is seen as a voluntary association of people for the worship of God and the pursuit of religious activities. In New France, particularly in its Acadian, Canadian, and upper country sectors, the Roman Catholic Church was the exclusive institutional expression after 1627 of the religious and spiritual life of the colonial population. Its activities touched all aspects of life — social, economic, political, demographic, as well as religious. The role of the church was so comprehensive and pervading to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that some historians have concluded that it was the dominant force in the French colony.

The nineteenth-century clerical historians (Faillon, Rochemonteix, Casgrain, Têtu) set the pattern in francophone historiography, as did Francis Parkman for anglophone historiography. They were followed without further critical analysis by most historians until relatively recently. Both views coincided inasmuch as they accorded the church a dominant role in colonial affairs. They differed in that the francophone interpretation tended to portray this as an heroic Golden Age in Canada’s history, whereas Parkman saw it as an oppressive theocracy with clerical intervention present in all aspects of public and private life. Those who saw clerical power and religious motivation as dominant and beneficial went so far as to argue that New France was a purified society in which Christian families, the parish as the centre of social activity, and the administration in which the church exercised important influence, shaped French-Canadian society. This was cast in the framework of a Providential mission which French Canadians were to assume in the New World. The negative Protestant assessment conceded that the Catholic Church had provided the colony with a sense of stability and continuity and, by playing up the heroism of the Jesuit missionaries, portrayed the church as an effective agency for social control in a region which, as Parkman observed, tended to violence and savagery.

This dominant interpretation has been greatly modified, and in some respects completely overturned, by more recent scholarship. Studies of the relations between church and state in early Canada and Louisiana, religious institutes, particular parishes, demographic trends, criminality, and popular culture, to name but a few areas, have resulted in a rather different evaluation of the Catholic Church in New France.

Conditions and attitudes in the religious realm prevalent during the French regime seem to have continued well into the early nineteenth century under British rule. Nevertheless, the British Conquest did radically alter the constitutional framework and create new challenges for the church in Quebec. But there was more continuity than sometimes surmised. Some of the problems that characterized religious life in New France were accentuated after 1760.
This was particularly true of the independent and undisciplined character of many parishioners and the serious lack of competent clergy to serve an increasing population.

Two serious misrepresentations of historical fact by the early historiography must be mentioned. One was to assume that the mystical and even fanatical Catholicism which characterized the first decades of colonization, the heroic age of the Company of New France, the Jesuit mission in Huronia, and the founding of Ville-Marie, continued to thrive after 1663. Had this been the case, then there would have been more substance for Parkman’s thesis, copied by so many others, that all liberty was stifled, the people were priest-ridden, and the officials were subservient to clerical direction. The second grave misrepresentation is to presume that the Ultramontanism of mid-nineteenth-century Quebec, a tendency then to oppose liberal views and to centralize authority in the papal bureaucracy, was but a prolongation of the French regime. To assume that the religious climate of 1850 was the same as was that of 1750 or 1700 would lead one far astray from social realities.

_Gallicanism_

The Roman Catholic Church was the national church of France and her colonies. It was presided over by the king, assisted by an Assembly of the Clergy, and it was usually referred to as the Gallican Church by historians to underline its jealously preserved traditional “rights, liberties and privileges” against what was seen in Versailles as the overweening power and influence of Rome. The king nominated the bishops and controlled the establishment of religious institutions and their recruitment, and through his officials supervised (and sometimes aided financially) all educational, charitable, correctional, and punitive establishments run by the church. This was the royal Gallicanism that was implanted in the Canadian colony with the first wave of settlers and missionaries.

Religion was seen as the basis of civil society. Therefore, the state was religious, more specifically it was Catholic. As for the New World, it was to be brought under Christian dominion by the Christian prince, the King of France (who was also styled His Most Christian Majesty, “eldest son of the church”), not by the papal agency created in 1622 — the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. The French could not conceive of a church which was independent of state authority. The role of the church was to develop the civic and social conscience as well as the spiritual life of the colonists. As for relations between church and state, the long-established maxim was that “the church is in the state, not the state in the church.” The state was religious and the church was national. The formula would be reversed in Quebec under British rule with the Romanists (or Ultramontanes) advancing the precept that “the state is comprised within the church.”
In the early or “heroic” age of New France, before the arrival of a bishop (1659) and the introduction of royal government to replace monopoly company rule (1663), the missionary clergy were involved in colonization, local administration, and probably even the fur trade. The situation changed when the king assumed direct control over the colony. The first intendant was instructed to “hold in just balance the temporal authority, which resides in the person of the King, and in those who represent him, and the spiritual authority, which resides there in the person of the said Bishop and Jesuits, in such a manner nevertheless that the latter always be inferior to the former.” The Jesuits, members of the militant Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1540 with a special mission under vows of personal obedience to the Pope to recoup the losses to Protestantism during the Reformation and to convert the heathen in “new found lands,” were perceived as particularly intelligent and politically active opponents of Gallicanism. The royal objective was that the colonial church should grow up in the image of the metropolitan church in France. Colbert assured Governor Courcelles that “when the colony increases in population assuredly the Royal authority will surpass the Ecclesiastical and will resume the correct proportion it ought to enjoy.”

There were numerous disputes between royal officials and churchmen, especially in the seventeenth century. Some of the early quarrels revolved about the curtailment of undue clerical influence, but the majority of confrontations were more personal in nature. Appeals to the Crown always resulted in the upholding of the principle of authority in its proper sphere, whether secular or religious. Although there were popular demonstrations against alleged abuses of both royal and ecclesiastical power, these “revolts” were never aimed at overthrowing established authority. The colonists expected bureaucratic and religious institutions to function for the common good.

Orthodoxy

The Catholicism of New France was orthodox and middle-of-the-road, in line with the Council of Trent, in matters of doctrine and discipline. It was subjected, nevertheless, to two radical currents in seventeenth-century French Catholicism.

The enthusiastic religious revivalism of early seventeenth-century France spilled over into the colony enabling the church to recruit leaders, both lay and religious, women as well as men, of exceptional quality and zeal to lay the foundations of charitable and educational institutions and to promote settlement. The “sanctimonious clique” of the Company of the Holy Sacrament, a secret society of dévots (generally wealthy and influential religious zealots and social reformers with cells throughout France who were organized to promote high religious ideals in public and private life), channelled metropolitan support for Canadian missions, settlement, and institutional
foundations. Nursing and teaching sisters were sent out as early as 1639. Seminaries for secular clergy were opened in Montreal and Quebec. Their crowning achievement appeared to be the Christian utopian settlement of Ville-Marie (1642), although the centre later developed into materialistic and military Montreal. These pious pioneers often possessed a shrewd sense of business. The Society of Notre-Dame of Montréal, for example, chose the island of Montreal not only for its stated objective which was “the conversion of the savages,” but especially for its agricultural prospects and commercial promise as a communications hub with the western and northern hinterland and with the Dutch and English colonies to the south. Catholics were no strangers to capitalism.

These zealots, the first bishop, and many of the early missionaries to the Amerindians promoted a “rigourist” form of Catholicism which stressed self-abnegation, severe penance, and sometimes manifested itself, particularly among the clergy, nuns, and certain native converts, in ecstatic or charismatic behaviour. The Crown suppressed the dévot network in 1664, deeming all secret associations to be dangerous. Excessive religious practices became less frequent or publicized in the colony as the fires of revivalism died down in France and as settlement progressed overseas.

Closely associated with revivalism in Old France were a number of adherents of an austere Augustinian religiosity known as Jansenism, which emphasized personal holiness and direct communication with God. The movement was named after Cornelius Jansen, Bishop of Ypres, who taught that without a special grace from God it was impossible to perform His will. The Jesuits attacked it as a form of Calvinism within the church and succeeded in obtaining a series of royal decrees condemning its teachings. The Sorbonne University condemned it in 1649 and the Pope condemned it in 1653. Many writers have assumed that the puritanical practices and teachings of the clergy in New France were reflections of this Jansenist undercurrent. The Jesuits went so far as to accuse Bishop Saint-Vallier (1688-1727) of Jansenism because his three publications — a catechism for the colony, a service book for the clergy, and a compilation of ecclesiastical ordinances — imposed rather severe restrictions on behaviour and belief. Closer examination, however, reveals only a dead-centre orthodoxy similar to the Old Country model. The so-called puritanism of the Canadian church derived from the strict observances and inflexible ideals of French revivalism, not from heresy.

Uniformity

The official view was that loyal subjects should adopt the religion of their sovereign, all of whom were Catholics except Henry IV during the early years of his reign. The Protestant Reformation gained a foot-hold in France in the sixteenth century, with perhaps as much as 15 per cent of the population opting
for Protestantism at the height of the religious troubles. Protestantism was seen not just as a religious heresy, but also as a political party favouring the theory that the king held his authority not by Divine right but by popular consent and sometimes going so far as to support republicanism. Thus the members of the largest Protestant group, the “allegedly Reformed religion” or Religion Prétendue Réformée, popularly known as Huguenots, were often suspected of disloyalty.

Contrary to another widely accepted idea, Protestants were not prevented from establishing themselves in the colonies when France first embarked on overseas ventures. Indeed, there was serious thought given at one time to resolve the religious differences in metropolitan France which were causing disastrous civil war by relocating all Huguenots in the colonies. The three chief colonization schemes of the sixteenth century — Roberval on the St. Lawrence in the 1540s, Villegaignon in Brazil in the 1550s, Ribault and Laudonnière in “Florida” in the 1560s — all had considerable Protestant participation. All were unqualified failures. At the turn of the century, La Roche, Chauvin, and Gua de Monts, who promoted settlement at Sable Island, the Saguenay, and Acadia respectively, were Protestants. The Huguenots did not find, however, that settlement abroad was either attractive or essential for the success of their commercial interests in the exploitation of such resources as fish, furs, and Brazilian timber and exotic products. Although subject to certain religious disabilities, they preferred to remain in France where since 1598 the Edict of Nantes afforded them limited toleration. In Canada, the activities of Champlain, the Jesuits, and the Company of New France still depended in part on Huguenots’ commercial networks for shipping, investment, insurance, supplying, and marketing.

The numbers of Huguenots who were involved in commerce in Acadia and Canada worried the Catholic missionaries. They succeeded in convincing Cardinal Richelieu, as part of his wider campaign against Protestants, to insert a clause in the charter of the Company of New France, which was assuming the administration of the colony and the monopoly of its trade in 1627, restricting settlement to “natural-born French Catholics.” This measure was designed to eliminate both the French Protestants and the naturalized foreign-born. In 1659, Protestant worship was specifically prohibited in Acadia, where fishing and trading continued to attract many Protestants.

Protestants continued to filter into the colony where they found they had to live quietly “as good Catholics,” as one edict phrased it. They came as indentured servants, merchants, artisans, prisoners-of-war, officers, and soldiers. To the surprise of the authorities, it was found that some of the brides or “king’s daughters,” recruited in Catholic hospices in French cities and sent out to found new families, were Protestants. In 1670, Bishop Laval pressed the home government to prevent French merchants dealing with Canada from
sending out Protestant agents and crews. He alleged that the Huguenots held “seducing discourses” in the colony which troubled both colonists and Amerindian converts, that they lent religious books, held secret assemblies, and probably had some communication with a growing number of Huguenots and Walloon Protestants who were settling in the Anglo-American colonies near New France. An underground Protestant tradition seems to have survived in certain families and parishes, but no public worship or instruction was tolerated. There was never a real threat to the religious uniformity imposed in 1627.

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 had no direct legal application to New France; nevertheless, Governor Denonville and Bishops Laval and Saint-Vallier did increase pressure on Huguenots in the colony to abjure or return to France. Following the death of Louis XIV in 1715, there was some relaxation of restrictions imposed on Huguenots. Once again, Protestants filtered into the colony among the troops, the brides, the workmen, and the prisoners-of-war. There were even some among the penal settlers, or those exiled to Canada for such crimes as salt smuggling, poaching, and tax evasion. By 1741, when Huguenot commercial firms in La Rochelle, Montauban, and Rouen had started trading with Canada, the numbers of Huguenots increased sufficiently for the authorities in Versailles to order a survey of the numbers and circumstances of the Protestants in the colony.

Bishop Pontbriand became sufficiently alarmed to raise the old cries of a Huguenot presence undermining Amerindian missions, promoting social disorder, and posing a security threat by their uncertain loyalty. Intendant Bigot sent an unequivocal defence of the Huguenots to the Minister of Marine pointing out that they were a mere handful, lived peaceably, did not interfere with Catholic practices, did not distribute “bad books,” and had no adverse effect on missionary work. Bigot argued that to prosecute them would result in “diminishing the commerce and abundance of the colony.” In addition, he spoke in defence of the Jews, of whom there were none in the colony at the time, but with members of whose community in Bordeaux he had formed a joint stock company for the Canadian supply trade.

New France seems to have been shielded also from the radical ideas of the French Enlightenment. The writings of the philosopbus passed unnoticed in Quebec, Montreal, and Louisbourg. Deism seems to have gained no formal adherents, although there were individuals such as the Baron de Lahontan who criticized the status quo and there was the worldly business and bureaucratic elite which aped the fashions and passions of the French court. Royal and ecclesiastical censorship were quite effective in a colony which had but infrequent communication with Europe. Not surprisingly, there was no printing press in the colony, for it would have been an unprofitable venture. The institutional and private libraries, some of which lent books, were stocked
largely with theological, devotional, or technical works. In such a context, religious diversity was unlikely.

*Missions*

The church in New France was at the outset a missionary church. The first religious services were held by the chaplains attached to various expeditions and their authority derived either from the bishop of the port of departure or the superiors of their particular religious order. When Fathers Pierre Biard and Ennemond Massé started evangelizing in Acadia in 1611, they went under the general authorization of the Jesuit General. Similarly four Recollets (a reformed branch of the Franciscan order) whom Champlain brought to Canada four years later obtained letters-patent from Louis XIII. In 1619, the Archbishop of Bordeaux authorized four Recollets to begin missionary work in Acadia, an enterprise which was terminated by the Scottish seizure of that region in 1624. The clergy were not free to minister anywhere they chose, for they had to have letters of provision or authority to exercise their ministry legitimately. The unevangelized areas of the world did not come under any episcopal jurisdiction and it was not until the Vatican in 1622 established the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith that the papacy effectively claimed jurisdiction in these territories.

In 1625, because their own human and financial resources were insufficient, the Recollets welcomed the more influential and wealthy Jesuits who came to assist them in evangelizing the Amerindians. An English occupation of Quebec from 1629 to 1632 temporarily closed down these missions. In 1630, more Recollets went to Acadia where they laboured until 1645, but when Quebec was restored to French rule in 1632, Cardinal Richelieu did not help them to return to Huronia but assigned Canada to the Jesuits and Acadia to an offshoot of the Franciscan order dedicated to the ideals of poverty and austerity, the Capuchins. The latter worked in Acadia until 1658. The Recollets returned to Canada only in 1670 and then mainly to serve as chaplains of military outposts and the fishing stations of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In the eighteenth century, they provided the religious services for the garrison and townspeople of Louisbourg as well. In 1659, secular priests popularly known as Sulpicians opened a seminary in Montreal and began missionary work among the native population of the island and along the Bay of Quinte. They eventually concentrated their Amerindian missionary efforts at Lac des Deux Montagnes (Oka).

The Jesuits were the chief evangelizers in New France as a result. Their efforts were later honoured in the canonization of seven "martyrs," men who lost their lives along with converts and unconverted in the context of an inter-tribal war, and of the Mohawk maiden, Catherine Tekakwitha. Eventually, the Jesuits were joined in the Illinois country by some secular priests of the
Seminary of Foreign Missions at Quebec. After the cession of Acadia to Britain in 1713, secular priests from the French seminaries of the Foreign Missions and of the Holy Spirit shepherded Acadians and Amerindians, assisted by the occasional Jesuit or Recollet missionary.

It has long been asserted that the French were successful in converting large numbers of native peoples. But recent scholarship has tended to qualify the degree of success. The majority of Amerindians remained attached to their traditional beliefs and the motives and concepts of those who did convert remain problematical. The missionaries initially placed their greatest hope for rapid and spectacular success in Huronia, where between 1615 and 1649 a substantial number of converts were made and mission stations and a central headquarters at Sainte-Marie (1639) were established. The Hurons had been singled out for a number of reasons, among them their sedentary way of life which facilitated evangelization and the setting up of Catholic institutions, their alliance and trade with the French, and their strategic location at a great communications hub in the hinterland. Albeit, conversions resulted in acute tensions developing between the native traditionalists and adherents of the new religion. The unity of the Huron Confederacy was impaired. Their traditional enemies, the Five Nations Iroquois, took advantage of the situation to disperse them, killing a number of the missionaries in the process (though not for religious reasons), and bringing the mission to nought.

Undaunted by such a stunning reverse, the Jesuits expanded their missions into the Great Lakes basin and Illinois country, as well as in the northern forests, and they even ventured back into Iroquois country from which they had been rebuffed at an earlier date. Their limited success among the Onondagas, the central tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy and keepers of the council fire, resulted in growing tensions between the traditionalists and converts so that by the 1680s the Jesuits had to retire. However, a number of converts remained attached to the new religion and not a few came to take up residence within New France. Similarly, a number of Mohawk converts migrated to the colony. Those missionaries working as itinerants among the nomadic Algonkian bands found the obstacles discouraging and the results sparse. Periodic visits replaced sustained evangelization in these regions. By the 1730s the Jesuits were faced with vast new territories and tribes to evangelize, as military and fur trade expeditions pushed farther into the hinterland towards the Rockies, but the success of their North American missions could not compare with the prospects of the Oriental missions and new recruits were not forthcoming. A slow withdrawal began in the interior in order to concentrate on the St. Lawrence valley.

By contrast, there was a surprising appearance of success in the eastern regions where the majority of the Micmacs, Malecites, and Abenakis formally adhered to Catholicism and declared themselves allies of the French. The
British conquest of Acadia only strengthened Micmac ties with their missionaries. As for the Abenakis, the encroachment of New Englanders on their ancestral lands was a factor which drove them in large numbers to seek refuge in Canada where their allegiance to France and Catholicism seemed assured. It is believed that the strength of the new religion of these eastern maritime Algonkian peoples lay in the fact that it was amalgam of traditional and Catholic beliefs.

The greatest success of the Amerindian missions was probably seen on the reserves, the first of which was created at Sillery, near Quebec, in 1637 to assimilate native converts and form an ideal Christian community. This reserve was finally located at Lorette and became the home of Huron refugees. Other reserves of “domiciled natives” were organized on seigneuries specifically conceded to the missionary clergy for the purpose of raising up a native Catholic population. The missionaries eventually tried to segregate their converts and shield them from the influences of the traditional life style and the evils of the French towns. Among those who came to live on these reserves, particularly at Caughnawaga (Jesuit) and Lacs des Deux Montagnes (Sulpician) near Montreal, were those seeking a Christian environment and the economic opportunities afforded through trade and military activities. The reserves created for the Abenakis at Bécancour, St. François, and Missisquoi, and those of the upper St. Lawrence established at St. Régis and La Présentation towards the close of the French period, also served as buffers between the colonists on one hand and the English and Iroquois to the south on the other.

**Diocese of Quebec**

As early as 1631, the need for a bishopric was felt because the extension overseas of French diocesan authority and of the rights of various religious orders did not deal adequately with jurisdictional quarrels, the organization of regular church services for the colonists, the regulation of educational and charitable institutions, and the supervision of missions. The attempts to erect the colony into a diocese of France met with many obstacles as a consequence of tense relations between the French Crown, certain religious orders, and Rome (the Holy See). By 1659, it was agreed to create a vicariate apostolic in New France rather than a bishopric. This meant that the church and missions in Canada, including the Jesuits, were directly subordinate to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome and not to the Archbishop of Rouen who claimed spiritual jurisdiction over Canada, as a parallel to the extension of port authority and Norman customary law to Canada. New France was among the first vicariates created by Rome as it extended its direct jurisdiction to unevangelized regions, thereby challenging the claims of Catholic monarchs to jurisdiction in missionary areas.
The first bishop was a very austere and dedicated prelate, François de Laval, who had been a student of the Jesuits, a member of the dévot organisations, and who by temperament and training was certain to enhance the church’s authority in a rather disorganized commercial outpost. He had been nominated by Louis XIV, but the papacy would only agree to the creation of a vicariate apostolic in 1659. As Vicar Apostolic and Bishop of Petrae until 1674, Laval tried to bring some order into colonial life. Some contended he did not possess the authority of a titular bishop. He waged a long and bitter struggle to impose prohibition (at least so far as brandy trade with the Amerindians was concerned), to institute adequate tithing, to hold off the canonical erection of parishes until they became self-sufficient, and to introduce higher moral standards and pious practices. He was a member of the Sovereign Council of the colony, but state officials tried to discourage his active participation. He and his successors chose most often to be represented by a substitute, and then only when cases of direct interest to the church were being heard. Although named titular Bishop of Quebec in 1674, with jurisdiction over all French territory in North America, he did not gain a seat on the Assembly of the French Clergy.

Bishop Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Vallier (1688-1727) placed the episcopacy on a more independent basis, making many enemies in so doing. He convened the first diocesan synod and greatly aided the missions in Acadia, Louisiana, and the Illinois country. His most lasting contributions may well have been his publications: notably the *Cathechism* which instructed generations of young Canadians in their faith, and his *Rituell* or service book. These, along with his numerous episcopal letters, firmly implanted the austere and devotional norms of the Catholic reformation and French revivalism in behaviour and belief. His assessment that the colonial church was experiencing a spiritual and intellectual low period at the beginning of the eighteenth century was probably correct. He suffered greatly from self-denials and illness, from five years’ internment in England, and from the resistance he encountered from clergy and laity to his reform ideas. He spent his large fortune on the poor among whom he died at Quebec.

Louis-François de Mornay (1727-33), a Capuchin, was named coadjutor with right to succession in 1713. Saint-Vallier needed him in Canada during his own long absences and especially in Louisiana with its problems peculiar to a slave and plantation economy. But Mornay steadfastly refused to set foot in New France and limited his interventions in Louisiana to acting through correspondence. On Saint-Vallier’s death in 1727, he automatically became titular Bishop of Quebec “receiving all the revenues of the bishopric” and administering the diocese from France to the continued detriment of the colonists. Prolonged absences on the part of the bishop not only reduced the prestige and visibility of religious authority, but also invited inroads on the church’s prerogatives, and created acute problems through lack of confirmations and ordinations.
Pierre-Herman Dosquet (1733-39), the fourth bishop, a “Belgian” from the principality of Liège who had spent two years with the Sulpicians at Montreal, was determined to restore to his office and pastors the prestige and power they traditionally could expect. But on his arrival, he was humiliated by the Superior Council of Quebec by being required to become naturalized before taking his seat on the colonial council. He tried to bring order into the financial affairs of the parishes, to impose better discipline on the parish clergy, to reform monastic life, to eradicate the brandy traffic, and to improve educational standards. Despairing of being able to improve significantly the moral and material health of the diocese, he returned to France where after four years of negotiations, and the promise of a handsome pension, the state was able to obtain his resignation.

State officials were now convinced that there was a spiritual crisis which could have unfortunate consequences for the civil power as well. Louis XV named François-Louis de Lauberivière (1740), a zealous, healthy, well-educated, and highly motivated young nobleman of twenty-eight years of age, as successor at Quebec, hoping to assure the church of the kind of long-term leadership it greatly needed. The nominee, however, caught the dreaded plague on the sailing vessel from La Rochelle and died twelve days after landing in Canada. So were dashed the hopes of the court, the church, and the colony.

By this time, some Canadians were beginning to hope that one of their own ecclesiastics might be named bishop. But the King chose Henri-Marie du Breil de Pontbriand (1740-60) as sixth incumbent. His administration did much to restore spiritual leadership. In addition to his normal supervisory, disciplinary, and liturgical role, he concerned himself with such matters as selective immigration, Amerindian missions, reform of the church calendar, elementary schooling, the expulsion of the Acadians, the threat of invasion, and the imposition of the church’s social teachings in times of famine and epidemics to curb profiteering, usury, and administrative graft. He gave his clergy wide discretion and powers to deal with abnormal situations which might arise as a result of a British invasion and military occupation. He died in June 1760, before the capitulation of Montreal. The church of New France was once again without a bishop as it faced the dark days of foreign occupation and an uncertain future.

Two facts emerge above all others from this outline of the spiritual direction of the church. The long absences of the bishops were sufficient to undermine any undue clerical intervention in temporal affairs. Rather, the opposite was true. Discipline tended to become lax in spite of the puritanical ideals espoused. Secondly, the leadership was European and from the privileged classes. Only after the Conquest would the church have a Canadian-born bishop of more humble origins.

In the threefold division (clergy, nobility, commoners) of traditional Ancien Régime society, the clergy were a privileged order. Among other things, this
meant that the church imposed its own justice within the purely spiritual domain through a church court known as the **Officialité**. First organized by the abbé de Quéylus, by virtue of his authority as Grand Vicar of the Archbishop of Rouen, it was more formally constituted by Bishop Laval in 1659 and 1675, and finally granted royal recognition in 1684. There was always some question which cases were purely in the ecclesiastical domain, but all appeals went to the Sovereign (later Superior) Council at Quebec. The church on occasion issued monitorys, or ecclesiastical censures, designed to enforce compliance with civil (state) laws. The bishop also issued *mandements* which were read from the pulpits enjoining the clergy and laity to higher levels of moral conduct and religious practice, but these had no force in law. These condemned such practices as priests retaining young women as housekeepers, wearing wigs, and attending popular celebrations; women dressing ostentatiously or appearing scantily clothed at the communion rail; supplying brandy, living with and illicitly trading with the Amerindians in defiance of state, church and parental prohibitions; gossiping during sermons; retiring to smoke and "swear the Holy Name of God and the Blessed Virgin," racing horses around the church, bundling under heavy robes in the pews in the winter season, and otherwise disturbing divine services. Appeals were sometimes made to the secular power to enforce the decisions of a parish council or the instructions of the bishop.

**Colonial clergy**

As the church was deemed to exist for the salvation of the king's subjects and the utility of his realm, contemplative orders were not favoured by the state and none were permitted to establish themselves in New France. Only those communities and individuals, male and female, who made a visible contribution to colonial welfare, through evangelization, pastoral care, chaplaincy service, teaching, nursing, or other charitable work were tolerated and supported.

As already noted, church organization developed in an unusual fashion in the colony. There was a bishop before a diocese was created and there was a cathedral church long before there was a chapter, or body of clergy responsible for the spiritual and temporal concerns of the cathedral church. The Chapter of Quebec appeared in 1684 and consisted of thirteen members whose chief duty was to meet together daily for worship. The religious communities often chose their confessors from this group, but otherwise it played an inconspicuous role. At the Conquest, however, when the colony was without a bishop, it took upon itself the administration of the diocese and elected an episcopal successor.

The colonial clergy consisted of both seculars and regulars. The regulars, such as Jesuits, Recollets and Capuchins, were bound by solemn vows of religion and lived in community, following a rule. The seculars, such as those of the Seminary of Quebec, the Sulpicians, and the Spiritans, by contrast, lived in the
world, could possess individual property, and owed their obedience to the bishop. The majority of parish priests in the colony were drawn from among the seculars, although in the early period the Jesuits served in that capacity and the Recollets were called upon occasionally in Canada and were the parish clergy generally in Isle Royale and the fishing stations.

In 1663, Bishop Laval established a seminary in the upper town of Quebec to train the parish clergy of the colony and to participate in the evangelization of the Amerindians. Following some practices of early Christian times which he believed appropriate for a "new church" in "the last days," Laval made the seminary his episcopal residence, had all tithes made payable to it for eventual redistribution to the missions and parishes, and made it the central headquarters of the parish clergy where they would come for periodic retreats, instruction, and eventually retirement. The parish of Notre-Dame at Quebec, which would serve as the cathedral church, was closely tied to the seminary and no precise distinctions were made in the revenues of the diocese, the cathedral chapter, the parish of Quebec, and the seminary. This centralization may have served well during the difficult days of establishing the faith in a new land, but it also suited the authoritarian character of the bishop and it was contrary to the established principles of the Gallican church.

At the urgings of the secular officials, and with the cooperation of Bishop Saint-Vallier, the central role of the Seminary of Foreign Missions at Quebec was reduced. It continued to train most of the parish clergy and by 1760, when over 80 per cent of the parishes and missions in the colony were ministered to by Canadian-born curates, it had seen 118 of its students ordained. Nevertheless, the teaching was still entirely in the hands of seculars sent from France, who numbered but five at the time of the Conquest.

A similar situation existed at Montreal, where seculars from the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris established a seminary in 1657 and also lived in community. In 1664, they acquired possession of the island of Montreal and they provided the curates for the parishes of that region. They remained a strictly French community and failed to recruit colonial candidates for the ministry.

Both of these communities of secular clergy, which remained affiliated with their respective founding houses in Paris, were supplied with capital, material assistance, and personnel from France. But through generous land grants and prudent acquisition, annual state subsidies called gratifications, and various royal privileges, they became financially independent. The Sulpicians were intellectually superior to their colonial colleagues who graduated from the Seminary of Quebec. The latter were often depicted as being as unrefined, ignorant, and superstitious as their rural parishioners.
Parish organization

Bishop Laval initially planned that the parish priests, known as curés, should remain untenured and hold their charges at his discretion. Exceptions were made for Quebec and Montreal, where the respective seminaries named the incumbents, and for three parishes where a patron founder, one who had built a stone church and provided an endowment, nominated the curate.

Strictly speaking, all the chapels and churches of New France were missions until canonically erected into parishes. Thus the first congregations meeting for worship were in forts, and later in chapels belonging to religious communities at Montreal, Trois Rivières, Quebec, and Louisbourg, and did not formally constitute parishes. Louisbourg never had a parish church throughout its history.

Parishes were canonically erected only as approved by the state. Quebec’s parish was erected in 1664, and not until 1678 were fourteen more established including Montreal. Under pressure from state officials to create more parishes as the population complained of lack of availability of various religious services which a Christian state ought to provide its subjects, Bishop Saint-Vallier erected twenty-five more parishes. In 1721, Governor Vaudreuil ordered a general inquiry into the state of parochial affairs. The governor and intendant then confirmed the boundaries of existing parishes, set those of future parishes, and determined the criteria for the erection of such parishes. In all, 126 parishes were created, but 12 of these disappeared in periodic readjustment of boundaries. Thus by the end of the French regime, there were 114 parishes which served as social and administrative units. The parish priest was its spiritual leader and social advisor, but the militia officer was its civil and military leader. Each curé was required to keep a register of births, deaths, and marriages. The militia officer replaced the parish priest in making public announcements and civil proclamations.

Generally, a parish had to have a population sufficient to justify a resident curate, the necessary resources to support it adequately, and the agreement of the population concerned to the boundaries proposed. The bishop named the curés or missionaries whose tenure normally was at his discretion. It was not unusual for a priest to serve a parish and several missions at once. Parishioners could, and on occasion did, petition to have a curate replaced. There were several cases of outbursts of popular violence when parish boundaries were altered or financial obligations were imposed. The construction of a church required a congregational meeting. It would appear that many parishioners were lax in furnishing free labour or funds necessary for building, repairing, and maintaining a church and priest’s residence (or presbytère).

In addition to honoraria paid for various services rendered, a parish priest was entitled to a tithe, or a payment which was theoretically equivalent to
one-tenth the value of cereal crops. In 1663, a royal edict set the rate in New France at 1/13th of the production of the soil. However, reductions were soon conceded in many areas, so that in 1667 the rate was set at 1/26th for a period of twenty years and total exemption for five years on newly cultivated lands. Each parish appointed two assessors who determined the value of standing crops ten days before harvest. The habitants were required to deliver the threshed grain owed to the priest. A royal decree of 1707 confirmed this arrangement permanently. The tithes in many areas did not suffice for the upkeep of the clergy, so in 1679 a minimum income had been determined and the difference in the curate’s stipend was made up from a royal subsidy of 8,000 livres paid to the colony. There was much haggling over crop yields, and great reticence on the part of many parishioners to deliver the full amount of their assessed tithe on schedule. On occasion, the state was asked to intervene to force habitants to meet their obligations. There was never a tithe imposed on furs, and the tithe on fish in Louisbourg was infrequently collected.

The parish was democratically organized to administer its temporal affairs through an elected council or board known as the fabrique. In addition to the parish priest, there were the marquilliers — three active churchwardens supported by the three outgoing members — men elected by the congregation and who received no remuneration apart from some social honours and distinctions. The fabrique was the corporation which held the title to local church properties and as such it was responsible for providing the mass wine, wafers, and candles, heating the church in winter, paying the beadle, maintaining the cemetery, and keeping the interior of the church in good repair. This was paid out of weekly collections, pew rentals, burial fees, special offerings, and the like. The building of a church and rectory, repairing their exteriors, as well as in a few of the more populous parishes organizing a parochial school or hiring a schoolmaster, required a congregational meeting in which the parishioners assessed themselves in terms of manual labour, materials, and money. Again, the numerous interventions by the civil power to oblige parishioners to honour their pledges suggests a population that was neither priest-ridden nor excessively pious.

Education

Schooling was the preserve of the church in the colony; it was one of the domains in which it had to establish its “usefulness to his Majesty's service.” Not surprisingly, in a remote and undeveloped outpost, all the religious communities, even those devoted mainly to hospital work or to chaplaincy service, assumed some responsibility for the education of the children of the colonists and of the few Amerindians who remained long enough in their hands to receive some instruction.
The Jesuits founded a college at Quebec in 1635, in order to benefit from the provisions of a bequest, but not until 1651 did regular instruction of boys at the elementary level begin. This soon expanded into advanced studies; in the eighteenth century the programme in hydrography, for example, attracted Marine cadets even from France itself. The colony's surveyors, river pilots, and legal assessors were also trained by them.

The Sulpicians at Montreal took up the teaching of boys upon their arrival and soon had schools operating for Algonkian and Iroquoian youth as well. By the end of the seventeenth century, they operated a model school at Montreal and had organized a community of teaching brothers, which proved shortlived. Their next undertaking was the organization of petites écoles, or primary schools designed to provide rudimentary instruction and religious preparation for one's first communion, throughout Acadia, a project which foundered with the British conquest there in 1710.

The Recollets had schools in Montreal, Trois Rivières, and Louisbourg, in addition to teaching in parochial schools when named to parish charges. When they assumed chaplaincy duties at Fort Frontenac and Detroit, they opened some of the first schools for French and native children in the upper country. The various religious orders and congregations were sometimes in competition and often critical of each other. The Recollets further distinguished themselves by their in-fighting, coming as they did from three different "provinces" or jurisdictions (Aquitaine, Saint-Denis, Brittany). The friars from Brittany who were the chief religious order on Isle Royale were often criticized for their laxity and ignorance by both church and state officials, but the common people seem to have liked their simple piety and concern for their privations.

The Seminary of Quebec saw its role reduced in 1692 to the preparation of candidates for the priesthood. Many students passed through its major and minor seminaries, although most advanced instruction was given at the Jesuit college. Those less inclined to intellectual pursuits were sent to its arts and trades school at Saint-Joachim, where students could also work on the Seminary farm. At Château-Richer a Latin or preparatory school was maintained for a brief period.

In 1694, the Charron Brothers, or Frères Hospitalliers de Saint-Joseph de la Croix, a charitable association of Canadian origin, was given permission to open a school for orphans in conjunction with its hostel for men and boys at Montreal. In addition to very rudimentary schooling, they offered training to underprivileged boys in crafts and manual arts associated with the operations of their stocking factory, brewery, and flour mill. When these projects failed, they were instructed by the Crown to devote their energies to six petites écoles. They kept recruiting in France in the 1720s in order to survive and attempted to interest the Brothers of Christian Schools to assume full responsibility for their
educational work. The community was finally disbanded in 1745; nevertheless, it had over the years provided the Montreal region with no fewer than twenty-four schoolmasters and there were ten rural schools in operation which owed their origins to their initiative.

There was an undetermined number of itinerant schoolmasters in Canada and Acadia and of resident schoolmasters in Louisbourg. Also, some women gave private lessons in music and handwork in the chief towns. But the clergy decried this instruction given outside its immediate supervision, and in the case of itinerant schoolmasters questioned both their motives and their learning. In 1727, the church obtained a state ordinance stipulating that all schoolmasters had to be licensed by the bishop and intendant and that in no case might unmarried men teach girls. In many parishes, the resident priest offered the only education, centred largely on catechism, which the children received. The literacy rate remains problematical, although there is some evidence that in regions and periods of recent immigration, the rate was higher than among the largely local-born population. In New France as a whole, slightly more brides than grooms seem to have been able to sign their names on marriage registers, but in Louisbourg, the order was reversed. How directly this reflected on the education imparted in the colony is difficult to say.

The education of young girls was not neglected in New France, in any case. It was often described as being very elementary, designed to impart the most rudimentary general knowledge, some domestic skills, and especially preparation for marriage and motherhood through familiarity with the catechism. One lay critic, however, felt that too many country girls were receiving too much formal education which made them frivolous and lazy like so many of their contemporaries from the social elite living in the principal towns.

The Ursulines, members of the oldest and most important teaching order of women in the church, arrived at Quebec in 1639, twenty years before the first bishop, prepared to offer the primary and finishing school education usually destined for the daughters of the elite. They came from two different houses in France and experienced some problems of adjustment in the colony. Very soon they were taking in girls of all ages and from all social ranks, both boarders and day students, also as many Amerindian girls as they could manage and could convince to remain more than a few weeks under their close supervision. In 1697, they extended their educational work to Trois Rivières and in 1727 to New Orleans. Their first superior, the mystic and theologian, Mother Marie de l'Incarnation, firmly established the cloistered community in the colony, despite some doubts expressed about its "usefulness" to the state. Also remembered was their last superior of the French period, Mother Esther Wheelwright, a New England captive and convert to Catholicism, who provided hospitality and nursing care to both French and English combatants in the Seven Years' War.
Two cloistered communities of Sisters Hospitallers also served in the colony and on occasion did some teaching. But the most lasting educational work among girls, and children of both sexes in some rural parishes, was undertaken by a secular community founded in the colony. In 1657, Marguerite Bourgeoys opened a school for girls in Montreal and the following year she organized a number of pious women to provide primary instruction to the children of the poor and those in rural areas. These so-called Sisters of the Congregation received royal letters-patent in 1671, but Bishop Laval refused to support their request to become a religious institute taking solemn vows because they were seculars moving about freely from place to place instead of being cloistered. They were permitted, nevertheless, to open a second school in Trois Rivières, a boarding school in Montreal, a school for domestic sciences at Pointe St. Charles, a school for Algonkian girls on the Sulpician reserve, and petites écoles in four rural parishes. Bishop Saint-Vallier officially recognized them as a religious congregation in 1698 after vainly trying to prevent them from visiting the rural parishes in pairs in order to teach children of both sexes. They extended their activities to the town and environs of Quebec and to Louisbourg. At the latter garrison town, they became enormously popular and their normal complement of six nuns taught at least one hundred pupils from September 15 to August 15 of each academic year. By the end of the French period, they had seventy members, more than twice as many as the next largest women’s community. This might be explained by the fact that their work was more visible than that of cloistered orders, that they recruited especially among the lower classes, that their dowries upon entrance were relatively small, and that their rules were comparatively relaxed for the time. The quality of instruction was probably no better than the mediocre standards of similar popular orders in France, and it is unlikely many girls prolonged their education in these schools although tuition fees were low.

Charitable work

Along with education, the church was expected to provide various welfare services and maintain charitable institutions. Three women’s communities and two men’s communities devoted themselves largely to these aspects of religious service. Hospital care was provided in Quebec from 1639 onwards by Sisters Hospitallers from Dieppe at the Hôtel-Dieu. Twenty years later, another community of Hospitallers of Saint-Joseph from La Flèche arrived to take over a small hospital in Montreal started by Jeanne Mance the previous year. Bishop Laval tried unsuccessfully to unite the two cloistered communities and the two hospitals under one centralized administration. Instead, the Quebec community hived off to form a new community and General Hospital for the care of the aged, infirm, and insane outside the walls of the city. Meanwhile, Bishop Saint-Vallier had organized a Bureau of the Poor which served as a relief centre
and employment agency in each of the three principal towns of Canada. Although the Hôtel-Dieu at Quebec never lost its reputation as being the foremost hospital in the colony, it was the General Hospital and its community of Sisters Hospitaliers in the suburbs of the capital that became the elitist institution attracting young women from the upper classes of society to its religious community. It should be noted also that the hospitals served all segments of society, including military and naval personnel. Some wards were used to treat the insane, alcoholics, those supposedly possessed of the devil, the mentally retarded, and in some cases to detain women prisoners. The services offered closely approximated what in the twentieth century would be called the welfare state.

In 1692, François Charron and three associates in Montreal obtained the authorization of the Sovereign Council to open an almshouse for indigent elderly men. In a couple of years, their work had expanded into a General Hospital. Financial mismanagement and the diffusion of their work to include primary education, arts and trades training, apprenticeship programmes, and hospital and charitable work brought about insolvency, so that in 1747 Marie-Marguerite Lajemmerais-Youville took over their hospital. Ten years earlier, she had gathered about her in Montreal a number of pious lay women who devoted themselves to the visitation of the sick and infirm, offering kindergarten instruction, and teaching the blind. These women were popularly known as Grey Nuns, either because of their grey habit or in mild derision as “tipsy sisters” (soeurs grises) because of their high social standing, but they were formally known as Sisters of Charity of the General Hospital of Montreal. They soon had elderly people, orphans, foundlings, and “fallen women” at the Pointe-à-Callières institution which they associated with supporting farms at Chambly and Pointe St. Charles. In 1753 they obtained royal letters-patent which meant not only the survival of their hospital and charitable work at Montreal, but good prospects for later expansion over the continent.

In 1716, Brothers of Charity of St. Jean-de-Dieu were asked to come to Louisbourg to operate a small hospital near the fishing town. In 1730, they took charge of the one-hundred-bed Hôpital du Roi at the fortress itself, along with its apothecary, chapel, laundry, and morgue. Royal officials inspected it regularly to ensure that the state’s investment in both construction and operating costs was well managed, and that the colonists and garrison troops received adequate medical care. Even so, there were occasional complaints about the lack of a competent surgeon, infestations of vermin, poor food, and inadequate heating. The hospital was always understaffed so when male nurses were lacking, soldiers were pressed into service. On the whole, the Brothers of Charity discharged their duties well at great risk of infection and disease to themselves. In terms of the social welfare services generally available in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the people of New France were not badly served.
Popular religion

It is one thing to establish the teachings and practices of the church and quite another to determine the conformity and personal beliefs of its adherents. Nevertheless, there are some indicators of religious beliefs and practices that enable one to make an assessment of the role of religion in the lives of the colonists.

The clergy were expected to set the moral tone and provide an example of Catholic piety, an ideal which appears to have been attained to a reasonable degree. There were a few cases only of priests being “defrocked” and others being repatriated for improper conduct, although the bishops did complain of some moral laxity and spiritual indolence among their clergy. The behaviour of both the Recollets and Brothers of Charity at Louisbourg was not above reproach, to be sure, and the fact that they retained their popularity with the townspeople may indicate that their behaviour was not too different from that of most of the populace. If the official pronouncements and judicial records are to be believed, the greatest weaknesses of the colonists could be identified as “sins of the flesh” — drunkenness, love of worldly pleasures, vanity, excessive independence, and so on.

Legislation calling for observance of Sunday rest, church attendance, respectful behaviour at divine service, compliance with clerical admonitions, and the like indicate a prevalent independence which was not necessarily anti-clerical or irreligious. It is necessary to recall the relaxed and uninhibited atmosphere that prevailed during mass, and especially during the sermons, in New France. The churches were places of meeting as well as of worship for a highly gregarious, somewhat undisciplined population which loved all the pomp, ceremony, display, and ritual of the liturgy, but which generally took little account of the concept of solemnity. Officially the church frowned on smoking, discouraged dancing, condemned gambling and excessive drinking, and exercised its right of censorship of reading material and plays. On all counts, it was unable to enforce consistently its discipline. There were repeated condemnations of disrespectful wedding festivities and charivaris, for example, and even prominent members of the pious fraternity of the Ste. Famille were removed from office for attending all-night balls at Quebec or Montreal. Some of the bishops felt that the greatest weakness lay with the confessors, the parish clergy who were themselves of humble and colonial origin and had grown up in this rather uninhibited atmosphere and were, therefore, not as disturbed by deviations from the ideals taught by the church as they ought to have been. At the military posts, and notably at Louisbourg, where the Recollets served, it was expected that religious discipline would be less rigorous.

A large percentage of the colonial population had been catechized in the ten commandments, the seven sacraments, the commandments of the church, the
creed, and the ordinary prayers, and were generally acquainted with the liturgy and devotional practices of their religion. Contemporary accounts and documents such as wills and bequests do not indicate that for the majority of the people spiritual and religious matters were among their uppermost preoccupations. Almost without exception, the colonists wanted to die within the fold of the church and hoped to attain eternal salvation. They appear to have practised their religion more out of social convention and habit than out of any over-zealous conviction or clerically-inspired fear. Those who were over-zealous were just as marked as those who were unrepentant public sinners. Children were baptized, presented for first communion and confirmation; most marriages were performed “in face of the church”; people went to confession at least at Easter; all hoped to be able to receive the last rites before death. And yet, many cases of relatives merely “sprinkling” babies, of parents neglecting to send their children for religious instruction, and of parishioners setting the minimum acceptable performance of their religious “duties” as their standard of behaviour could be cited.

Religion at the popular level was not always clearly distinguishable from superstition. There was little difficulty in believing the official teaching of the church concerning the intercession of the saints, the efficacy of novenas, pilgrimages, and vigils, the miracles of healing, the averting of natural disasters, and the possibility of direct Divine intervention to reward good or punish evil. But to this was added a firm belief in the quasi-miraculous power of certain rites and religious objects, in witchcraft, and in devil-possession, and in the efficacy of certain traditional observances which were not completely in line with contemporary orthodoxy.

Towards the end of the French regime, a number of external elements seemed to make themselves felt. The clergy were concerned about the growing urbanization of society, the fact that religious vocations were falling behind natural population increase, that a materialistic outlook was not on the wane, and that there were signs a courtier society might develop at Quebec which could introduce the deism and scepticism of the Enlightenment overseas. New France was becoming more like the metropolis in a number of respects, and was more open to external contacts than had been the case in the seventeenth century. All of this meant that religious life and the role of the church were no longer what the pious founders of the “heroic age” had dreamed.
Selected Further Readings


