

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Blackfeet and the Black Robes, 1830-1850

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mq8p635>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 26(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Voggtresser, Garrit

Publication Date

2002-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The Blackfeet and the Black Robes, 1830–1850

GARRIT VOGGESSER

After a long and arduous trip to the Northwest where he battled “superstition” and “savagery” with the civilizing words of God, Jesuit missionary Father Pierre Jean De Smet’s convictions remained more resolute than ever. Mulling over his missionary efforts, he concluded, “The Blackfeet, especially, have something hard and cruel about their features. You can read in their faces words written in blood. There is hardly one innocent hand in the whole nation. But, of course, the Almighty can bring forth sons of Abraham from the hardest of rocks.”¹ De Smet’s determination to convert the western tribes to the Catholic faith represented not only a daunting task, but one fraught with uncertainty.

While a few authors have dealt with the conversion of the Blackfeet to Christianity,² scholars have ignored the ambiguity of relations between the Blackfeet and the Black Robes. Many analyses have taken a limited approach to a key question of Christianization: God or the Great Spirit? A lack of scrutiny on this core inquiry—whether God meant something, nothing, or something different for the Blackfeet—has obscured our historical understanding of the confrontation between the tribe and the Jesuits. Historical inquiries have failed to address fully another crucial issue: whether the tribes’ connections to Christianity were syncretic or pragmatic, a combination of new and old beliefs or a decision based on practicality. In essence, did their actions in the presence of the Jesuits reveal “cultural brokerage,” or rationality, or both? The keys to unraveling this puzzle lie in the symbolic language and acts of the Blackfeet themselves. The answers reveal a cultural dexterity far beyond what the Jesuits expected or recognized.³

While some tribes, such as the Flathead, took more quickly to Catholicism, the devotion of the Blackfeet proved much more difficult to

Garrit Voggeser is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma. His dissertation focuses on the Flathead (Salish and Kootenai), Blackfeet, and Fort Peck (Sioux and Assiniboine) reservations and the social, cultural, economic, and environmental repercussions of natural resource utilization (water and irrigation, farming, mining, transportation and railroads, timbering, and tourism) from 1885 to 1945..

develop. For the Jesuits, the Blackfeet took on a dual nature. The missionaries saw them as worthy converts, while describing them as cunning, conniving, and evil. A vision of the Blackfeet as Christian soldiers conflicted with the reality of their violent warfare against other tribes. This duality and the uncertainty of the Jesuits' views of the Blackfeet colored every interaction between the two, ultimately contributing to a Christianization effort that fell short of its designed intentions.

This essay is an attempt to dig beneath the cover of the formal interactions of the Blackfeet and Jesuits in order to unveil a better understanding of their feelings and beliefs.⁴ A great deal of ritual masked the intents of both groups. Much of the discussion—both contemporary and secondary, both historical and religious—has only touched the surface of the relationship, obscuring the meaning of the Black Gowns' religion for the Blackfeet.⁵ For the tribe, ritual could be underscored with great ideological meaning and intent, while also being utilized as an act to maintain good relations with the white interlopers that had become a part of their world. From 1830 to 1850, social, religious, economic, and environmental forces put great pressure on the Blackfeet, and they strove to control them as much as the white immigrants who contributed to those changes. The Blackfeet alternately rejected, adapted to, or transformed the meanings and intentions of the values that whites brought with them to the plains. This was not a wholesale trade, a transformation from Indian to white, from native spirituality to Christianity. At times, exchanges occurred between cultures that altered the meaning of life for the Blackfeet. More significantly, the exchange was not predicated on full acceptance of white cultural practices; the Blackfeet shrewdly chose certain elements of the new ideas and redefined them to fit into their own belief system.

GUNS, GOODS AND GOD: THE BLACKFEET IN THE 1830S

Guns, goods, and God assumed a defining role in transforming Blackfeet culture in the 1830s. Region and landscape shaped their physical activity and mentality. They inhabited a core region bound by the watershed of the Missouri River that later became the state of Montana and long served as a "fighting ground" of various tribes. De Smet saw much of the same bounty as the Blackfeet in their homeland, but overlaid that vision with the hand of God. His grand image of the West integrated "several of the noble animals of the territory" with the grand scale of the Rocky Mountains only "surmounted by the Cross."⁶

The Blackfeet Nation included three politically independent tribes that shared the same customs and language: the Piegan, Blood, and Blackfeet proper. Whites' estimations of the Blackfeet in the 1830s coalesced in the belief that they belonged to a "predatory class," "lived in a personal state of warfare," and were "hostile" and "always dangerous."⁷ Whether authentic or fabricated, the threat of the Blackfeet haunted the minds of almost every man that crossed the northern plains. Actual and fictional violence spills over the pages of the personal accounts of traders, trappers, and explorers. Fur trader Charles Larpenteur recalled, "not all this danger, and the hardships to be

endured on such a trip could prevent me from engaging in the spring of 1833." A fondness for unbounded wealth outweighed fear of violence and death.⁸

The enticement of the known and unknown of the American West also drew German scholar Maximilian of Wied. Traveling through Blackfeet country in 1833, he quickly learned that the Blackfeet nearly always killed beaver hunters when they fell into their hands. "Hence," he observed, "the armed troops of the traders keep up a continued war with them." Commerce between the Blackfeet and various companies promised great fortune; however, trade and travail always went hand in hand.⁹

Accounts of the 1830s trace the dual nature of Indian-white relations. Stories of peaceable trade alternate with sporadic violence. Uncertainty about the temperament of the Blackfeet abounded. Undaunted, traders worked diligently to make peace with the Blackfeet. By the spring of 1831, Kenneth McKenzie, a proprietor of the American Fur Company, had already spent several difficult years attempting to strike up reliable trade networks with the Missouri River tribes. His experience taught that the Blackfeet were the crux—that he "could not well manage against their will."¹⁰

The Treaty of Peace and Trade that established Fort McKenzie testified to the significance and power of commerce to compel such an uneasy union. The trade network sanctioned Blackfeet dominance over the region, and later contributed to the escalation of conflict, violence, and bloodshed. Chiefs from the three Blackfeet tribes made their mark on the contract, symbolically consenting to peace and requesting that the "Great Spirit, who watcheth over us all, approve our conduct and teach us to love another." This treaty of trade and peace, consecrated by the guidance of the Great Spirit and written by white traders, did not always produce the goodwill it intended.¹¹

The "solemn covenant" between the traders and the Blackfeet contributed to prosperity on both sides, but also generated rifts among Indian communities. Throughout the early and mid-1830s the Blackfeet built upon the networks, established new relationships, and prospered greatly. They traded not only with the American Fur Company and the "Spaniards of Santa Fe" but the Hudson's Bay Company as well.¹² The flow of material goods from the trading posts generated jealousies among the tribes. In the late fall of 1831, W. A. Ferris, trapper and trader, reported that the Blackfeet planned to use newly acquired firepower to "commence a general war of extermination of all the whites, Flat Heads and others" that had trespassed into their country. The growing hostilities marked a larger, general shift in the nineteenth century away from intertribal dependency and toward warfare. The expanding and increasingly complex market exacerbated conflicts over territory. In the spring of 1832, for example, the Blackfeet lost "sixteen of their scalps," but made off with more than a thousand horses. The ebb and flow of war between the Blackfeet and Flathead continued for at least the next twenty years. By no means did the Blackfeet win every battle, but the continual warfare took a great toll on the Flathead. The losses from hostilities propelled them into the hands of Black Robes, who offered, if not definite protection, a partial barrier against the Blackfeet.¹³

Along with the material goods that traders brought up the Missouri, they also carried a microbe that much more radically altered the way of life for the Blackfeet and other tribes. The “scourge of 1837” left countless lodges empty, taking 50 percent of the Blackfeet. Some saw the smallpox ravage as evidence of white deceitfulness. Others felt the “Great Spirit had stricken them for attempting to injure their friends,” the traders. Some historians view the tragedy as definitive evidence that Blackfeet “military supremacy was broken forever.” Yet the tribe fairly quickly recovered many of their number lost to the scourge.¹⁴ The pestilence ultimately created a rift between the Blackfeet and whites, and with other tribes, that left all future interactions tinged with uncertainty.¹⁵

As traders and trappers delivered their trade goods and diseases, others came bearing an ideological message. While the eastern portion of the country experienced a turbulent revivalism, some Indians in the West began to find the “True Faith” for the first time. In the 1830s, religion swept westward as missionaries of various Christian faiths spread their version of civilization and moral order among the Indians. Though religion began to take root, the most basic of factors—inaccurate and faulty translation—thwarted missionizing goals. News of the conversion efforts began to filter into the communities of the Missouri River tribes.¹⁶

As early as 1831, one trader observed that the Flathead “received some notions of religion either from pious traders or from transient ministers.”¹⁷ The most influential of these “transient ministers” were not white, but Indian. The Iroquois became the middlemen that first delivered the Catholic message to the Flathead. The “True Faith” did not always produce true and positive results. Ferris concluded, “The doctrines they have received are no doubt essential to their happiness and safety in a future state of existence, but they oppose, and almost fatally, their security and increase in this world.” Survival in Blackfeet country relied on successful warfare and mechanisms of revenge for fallen comrades, but “fearing to offend the Deity,” some Flathead fell victim to the “shafts of their more vindictive enemies.”¹⁸

An unnamed visitor among the Flathead informed them that the “white people away toward the rising of the sun had been put in possession of the true mode of worshipping the Great Spirit.”¹⁹ In the 1830s, the tribe sent three delegations to St. Louis to request Black Robes among their tribe. Numerous factors prevented the Jesuits, and other faiths, from wholly complying with the request in that decade. The remoteness of the region and scarcity of provisions made early efforts beyond the financial capabilities of the Catholics. Next, the small number of Flathead, depleted by perpetual wars with the Blackfeet, did not seem to offer an appropriate venue. Similarly, the Catholic Church still had relatively few priests to conduct missionary work in the West. Not only did the Blackfeet pose a substantial threat to the Flathead, they posed great peril to the white man. Missionaries feared that the Blackfeet “would fall upon the abettors of their foes with signal revenge.” Despite these trepidations, a select number of Jesuits believed a “rich field” had begun to open for bringing the truths of Christianity and civilization to the Western tribes.²⁰

While the Flathead expended great effort to bring the Black Robes west, the Blackfeet remained uninterested in the white man's religion. Maximilian concluded that superstition pervaded their tribal culture. They worshiped Nantohs, a sun God, and always practiced "some strange custom or habit."²¹ Maximilian greatly simplified the extensive realm of Blackfeet spiritual belief. Yet what is important for the purposes of this examination is that the Blackfeet continued their own religious customs as other tribes began to practice Christianity. In the 1840s, the Jesuits finally answered the calls and began to work their way into the territory and minds of several tribes. Their teachings would prove as incapable as trade treaties in preventing tribal warfare. Still, religion would take its place alongside trade in transforming native culture.

THE BLACKFEET AND THE BLACK GOWNS, 1840–1846

From 1840 to 1846, the relationship between the Black Gowns and the Blackfeet was a complicated affair of swirling loyalties, infidelity, and fabricated faith. In 1840, the Society of Jesus made plans to announce its teachings "to these children of the forest and mountain." The promise of success largely rested on the shoulders of the great "globe-trotting Black Robe" De Smet. And so began what one historian has called the "romance of the Flathead Indians."²²

The path seemed straight and clear to De Smet. After all, for nearly ten years the Flathead had beseeched the Jesuits to come. Through an interpreter, he translated the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and other acts into Salish. Historians and religious scholars have clearly outlined these first steps and the following factual points, but much of the subsequent explanation becomes sketchier. The Jesuits planned on creating a religious flock among the Flathead, but they also planned on "farming a revelation." De Smet concluded, "To aid them in this philanthropic object is our sacred duty as men, as Americans, as Christians." He spent two months with the Flathead teaching them about farming, civilization, and religion.²³

The single most important question in De Smet's mind centered on the hostile tribes, especially the Blackfeet. In the late fall of 1840, he made it through the perilous territory "overrun by war parties" of Blackfeet, Assiniboines, and Sioux, arriving at Fort Union. After the Jesuit related the journey, an Indian chief replied, "The Great Spirit has his Manitoos; he has sent them to take care of your steps and to trouble the enemies that would have been a nuisance to you." De Smet surmised, "A Christian would have said: He has given his angels charge of thee, that they guard thee in all thy ways." In early October, his party encountered the Blackfeet who "darted upon [them] like lightning." Quickly, an interpreter informed them that De Smet was a Black Gown, "the man who spoke to the Great Spirit." Hearing the remark, the chief immediately instructed his men to lay down their weapons, and the two parties "performed the ceremonies of shaking hands and smoking the calumet of peace."²⁴

Desiring clarification about this man who claimed to have such direct access to the Great Spirit, the chief invited De Smet back to his camp. He asked the Black Gown to speak to the Great Spirit once again, “to say grace” as De Smet recorded, and immediately the Blackfeet began to lift their hands into the air. De Smet questioned this action, and the chief replied, “When we lift up our hands...we signify that all of our dependence is on the Great Spirit, and that he in his fatherly care provides for all our wants; we strike the ground to signify that we are only worms and miserable creeping beings in his sight.” When the chief asked De Smet what he had told the Great Spirit, a poor translation prevented the Jesuit from explaining the significance of the Lord’s Prayer. Clearly the Blackfeet and De Smet made a connection, but several factors obscured communication. In essence, were they talking about the same thing when they referred to the “Great Spirit”? The Blackfeet had a long tradition of spirituality that resembled Christianity, but their religion carried different meanings. Finding the distinctions between God and the Great Spirit—recognizing the Blackfeet perspective of the Jesuits—goes a long way toward explaining the Indians’ subsequent reactions to the missionaries.²⁵

De Smet returned to the East full of great hope for bringing the western tribes into the Catholic faith. His first mission among the Indians taught him that a “rich harvest of souls was waiting for the reapers, [and it] awakened a general desire in his brother Jesuits to consecrate their lives to the Indians.”²⁶ In 1841, De Smet set out once again with Fathers Nicolas Point and Gregory Mengarini. By October, De Smet had consecrated the newly erected St. Mary’s Mission and outlined the religious goals for the Flathead. The Jesuits taught them that Christians must have “humility, modesty, temperance, irreproachable behavior, industry or love of labor, etc.” Most important of all, they needed the “courage and fortitude of the martyrs, because in the neighborhood of the Blackfeet there [was] the continual danger of losing either the life of the soul, or that of the body.”²⁷ The Jesuits believed that Christianity offered hope and guidance in the “darkness surrounding the Flathead mission.” In the face of Blackfeet incursions, hope was all they had.²⁸

In the minds of the Jesuits, and quite often in reality, the Blackfeet proved inimical to Christianity. Mengarini found the tribe quite troubling. He fumed, “To get rid of the Blackfeet was harder than to get rid of mosquitos, for the Blackfeet were the hereditary foe of the Flatheads. Hence the history of our mission would, if written fully, be an account of Blackfeet inroads and Flathead reprisals.” The Blackfeet had two virtues: “to kill men, and steal horses.” Yet they took on a dual nature—“now peaceable, now warlike”—and became the “most constant callers” at the mission. Mengarini frustrated efforts with the Flathead by attempting to console the Blackfeet and bring the faith to them. Despite the moral lessons of the Jesuits, religion could not erase the un-Christian antagonism between the two tribes.²⁹

Violence often overshadowed the few advances of Christianity among the Blackfeet. On Christmas Day 1841 the missionaries baptized two refugees, a father and son from the tribe that found truth in Catholicism. The father, Nicolas, “overflowing with fervor,” determined to convert his tribesmen. He managed to bring in a small band to parley with the Flathead. After bedding

down for the night, several shots awoke the camp. A “Blackfoot thief” had been shot several times after being caught in the act of stealing Flathead horses. The Flathead “left to the wild beasts the performance of funeral rites.” At the same time, the Pend d’Oreille, allies of the Flathead and often seen as part of one big family, killed twenty-eight Blackfeet.³⁰ Father Point later wrote, “A few days later there were only six heads still attached to the twenty-eight bodies strewn across the bloody field, and these had been so ravaged that one would have thought that they had been there for centuries.” While the Blackfeet continued to disdain the Jesuit teachings, the Flathead and their allies hardly seemed more acquainted with the Christian message.³¹

A dualistic vision of the Blackfeet burdened the Jesuit enterprise with great anxiety. Blackfeet hostilities upon the Flathead revealed both evil incarnate and the power of God. Writing to his superiors, De Smet lamented that the Blackfeet were the “only Indians of whose salvation we would have reason to despair... for they are murderers, thieves, traitors, and all that is wicked.” But the “Black Feet [were] not hostile to Black Gowns.” Indians assured the Jesuits that they had nothing to fear from the Blackfeet as long as they presented themselves as “ministers of religion.” For the Blackfeet, the Black Robes represented a respectable, and passive, force that stood apart from the problematic relationship between the tribes. The Jesuits served as mediators in two different ways: as teachers of Catholicism and as part-time, and only partly successful, peace envoys. Not long after De Smet began the mission work, seventy Flathead took on a force of one thousand Blackfeet warriors. Before the engagement, the Flathead fell to their knees and “addressed such prayers as they had learned to the Great Spirit.” Miraculously, the Christian tribe held off the Blackfeet in an arduous five-day battle, leaving many of the hostiles dead and wounded, “whilst not one warrior of the Flat Heads was killed.” God had given them great courage and a boldness that astounded their antagonists, left them “panic struck,” and they quickly fled. Whether fictional or realistic, the battle became the mechanism for explaining the hand of God at work.³²

Christianity took on curious definitions, becoming a justification for violence. One night the Flathead wounded a Blackfoot while stealing horses. In alarming fury, the wounded man threatened death to anyone that dared approach him. With great courage, one of the Flathead chiefs, Peter, darted forward and killed the thief with one blow. Falling to the ground, Peter reportedly lamented, “Great Spirit! Thou knowest that I did not kill this Black Foot from a desire of revenge, but because I was forced to it; be merciful to him in the other world. I forgive him from the bottom of my heart all the evils which he has wished to inflict upon us.” Even though the language of Peter’s prayer may have acquired new nobleness through De Smet’s pen, it points out a perplexing dilemma. While the statement might reveal the strength of Christianity among the Flathead, it also demonstrated the tension between religion and a way of life. An “eye for an eye” could take on new meanings for Indians.³³

The Jesuits realized that a lasting change among the tribes required the conversion of the Blackfeet. Nevertheless, the missionaries simply could not

find a way to make an enduring peace. In the winter of 1841–1842, Blackfeet raids turned from bloody battle to theft. They stole into Flathead camps as many as twenty times, and “with so much dexterity and success” that they made off with hundreds of horses. De Smet did not disapprove of bloody retribution for the thievery, concluding “divine justice is punishing rigorously a number of their robbers.”³⁴

Justice could be meted out by less than divine means. While missionaries concurrently sought peace with and accepted retribution upon the Blackfeet, traders took pacification into a wholly different realm. In 1843 some American Fur Company men took a vicious route that resulted in what became known as “The Blackfeet Massacre.”³⁵ A band of Blood Indians killed a black slave named Reese who belonged to Francois A. Chardon, a local trader who “set great store by that Negro and swore vengeance on the band.” Chardon and his partner Alexander Harvey hatched a vengeful plot. When the Indians arrived to do business, the traders—or traitors—planned to invite three of the headmen into the fort, while the rest of the Blackfeet waited at the closed door of the fort. At a signal given by Chardon, Harvey would unleash a cannon filled with 150 lead bullets at the door at the same time that Chardon would massacre the headmen. With the Indians dispatched, the traders would gather all the buffalo robes and horses to be divided among the men, “share and share alike.” The ploy did not work as planned. The three chiefs knew that something sinister was afoot. Chardon managed to wound one of them, while Harvey killed only three and wounded two of the Blackfeet gathered outside. The Indians saved most of their horses, but left the robes. Harvey leapt from behind the cannon and finished off the chief wounded by Chardon, licking the “blood off the dagy [bowie knife] and afterwards made the squaws of the fort dance the scalp dance around the scalps, which he had raised himself.”³⁶

What did this massacre have to do with the Blackfeet and the Black Robes? Undoubtedly, Chardon and his cronies hatched a plan to kill a number of Blackfeet to profit through shady and malicious means. Regardless of the number that died at the hands of the plotters, the traders managed to at least partially satisfy their greed. For the Blackfeet, the scheme created a superlative example of deceitfulness that spread to all whites, no matter what their intentions. As one historian later put it, “Enough was done... to embitter the Indians so that the further usefulness of Fort McKenzie was at an end.” Chardon abandoned the fort, built another farther downstream, and the Blackfeet razed the old post. More important, the actions of the traders cast a shadow over all Indian-white relations. Trade had created a strong bond between the Blackfeet and whites that had been broken. This outrageous example of trickery established the context for all future relations between the Blackfeet and Black Gowns.³⁷

An occurrence the following winter provides a glimpse into the continuing problems among the Jesuits, Flathead, and Blackfeet. More specifically, the conflict pitted the Black Robes and Flathead on one side, and the Blackfeet on the other. In a typical situation, the Christian Indians shot a Blackfoot trying to steal some horses. Father Point “took advantage of the

occasion to speak to the man about God's judgment, and the Blackfoot responded that he had never heard such truths but that he would take them to heart." In this fantastic occurrence, death compelled the Indian to conversion. Selphisto, chief of the Pend d'Oreilles, took the convert under his wing, but "no sooner had he been given hospitality... than eleven horses vanished, all stolen by the Blackfeet." Some infuriated young Indians, "more impassioned than reasonable," blamed the guest, but Selphisto harnessed their rage by explaining their "Christian duty." The chief's son pursued the thieves, retrieved the horses, and "was returning triumphantly when he met another party of Blackfeet who killed him." Perhaps W. A. Ferris had been correct; Christianity might promise a bright future, but did not always solve the problems at hand.³⁸

In spite of the extreme hostilities that continuously erupted, the Blackfeet and Black Robes, still occasionally observed respectful, formal relations. This dichotomy of violence and peace revealed the tentative nature of interaction between the two groups. In March 1844, Father Point convened a meeting between the Piegan and Flathead. The gathering began with the calumet ceremony. As Point indicated, there was "something special about this ceremony among the Blackfeet." The tribe undertook the ritual with great formality; it was a ceremony that showed great respect for those involved, but did not necessarily mean that all shared the same ideological beliefs. The ceremony, led by the Great Toque, or bearer of the calumet, represented a social and political structure that gave great honor to medicine men, chiefs, and others in honorable positions. The practice demonstrated the dedication and deference of the Blackfeet to men of wisdom and knowledge, while reflecting an undeniable tension between the Indian vision of life and the Black Robes' preferred ideal.³⁹

In 1845, De Smet revived the goal of bringing the Blackfeet into his spiritual family, and thus bringing peace between the two tribes. Great fear colored every aspect of the mission and shrouded the priest's hopes in constant doubt. Jesuit and trader alike advised him against "the grave imprudence of the step he was about to take." After meeting resounding defeat against the Pend d'Oreilles, the Blackfeet threatened that they would kill the first priest they met. Perhaps unintentionally, the missionaries exacerbated conflict by giving courage to tribes that would not have normally been so zealous and confident in attacking the Blackfeet. De Smet heard frightening stories of the Blackfeet killing and scalping strangers, then abandoning "to the wolves and dogs, the palpitating limbs of the unfortunate victim of their vengeance, hatred, and superstition." Still, De Smet decided to forge on. The preservation of St. Mary's and the "salvation of souls [was] at stake." De Smet resolved, "The Lord can, when he pleases, mollify these pitiless and ferocious hearts."⁴⁰

Although the reputation of the Blackfeet put dread into the minds of many, the tribe began to experience less and less promising fortunes. De Smet later recorded, "The year of 1845 will be a memorable epoch in the sad annals of the Blackfeet nation." Constant warfare, the disruptions of trade, the disorder of disease, and the inroads of whites in general had withered the once formidable strength of the Blackfeet. In late October, the Cree "were medi-

tating a deadly stroke upon the Black-feet," ultimately routing a band of the tribe. The "Manitous whom they had thought so propitious" did not favor the Blackfeet.⁴¹

The year 1845 proved disastrous, but Blackfeet spirituality remained strong. The tribe lost a great number of warriors, the Cree carried off hundreds of horses, and the Crow massacred fifty families of one band.⁴² Despite the misfortune and growing presence of the Black Robes, the tribe remained true to their beliefs. They still invoked the great Manitou Wizakeschak, the old man. They retained their view of Blackfeet heaven, "a country composed of sandy hills, which they call Espatchekie, whither the soul goes after death, and where they will find again all the animals they have killed, and all the horses they have stolen." Still, the Blackfeet were at the crossroads of two worlds, a time and place that demanded change.⁴³

In actuality, 1846 was fraught with more ambiguity and disruption than 1845. Some Blackfeet seemed to take to the Jesuit teachings, while in other cases that certainty seemed tentative. One thing seemed sure: the Flathead had greater success against the Blackfeet in battle in those years than they had ever had. For some Blackfeet, the increasing might of the Flathead evidenced that the "medicine of the Black-robos [was] stronger than theirs." Father Point recounted a meeting with a member of the Mad Dogs, a "brotherhood whose principal feature [was] a ridiculous sort of bravery." A Mad Dog told Point of an occasion when he had made the sign of the cross in the presence of a Gros Ventres while hunting. The Blackfoot's companion scoffed at the religiosity of his companion, but "he soon had cause to repent, for he wandered off just a few steps looking for a deer to kill when he was riddled by bullets from the rifles of an enemy party." The cross certainly meant something to some Blackfeet.⁴⁴

Some found resonance in the Christian message. Between the smallpox epidemic of 1837 and the fall of 1846, the Blackfeet lost more than half of their population and women constituted more than two-thirds of the remainder. There seemed no better reason to accept Christianity; the situation called for some sort of defense mechanism. Never one to give in, De Smet once again determined to meet with the Blackfeet to spread Christianity among them. To accomplish the religious goals, De Smet had to effect a lasting peace among the Blackfeet and Flathead. Traveling with a band of Flathead, De Smet learned that a numerically superior Crow force planned on attacking some Blackfeet. The intervention of the Flathead saved the weakened band, prompting the Blackfeet to request a friendship between the two tribes. De Smet recorded that they then begged him to "to take pity on them; they [were] now determined to hear the words of the Great Manitou of the whites and to follow the course which the Redeemer had marked out on earth." The Blackfeet offered up eighty of their children for baptism. De Smet's account of the incident is suspect. First, the battle placed the Blackfeet between a rock and a hard place. To show thankfulness, to maintain peace in their vulnerable condition, and to prevent attacks in the near future, the tribe may have believed that they needed to heed De Smet's words. Next, if the incident convinced them of the power of the white man's "Great Manitou," why was it that

only the children were baptized? These issues remained unanswered in De Smet's tale.⁴⁵

Other events obscured the dedication of the Blackfeet to Christianity. De Smet spent five weeks among the tribe in the fall of 1846, believing he established a "more firm peace." No matter how "firm" or tentative the concord, vagueness tinged the missionary effort. According to De Smet, the Blackfeet remained "savages in the full meaning of the word, accustomed to wreak vengeance on their enemies and wallow in blood and carnage...[and] plunged in superstitions which brutalize their souls." Nevertheless, De Smet noted, "a bright light is beginning, it would seem, to dispel the shadows under which these poor pagans have lived for so many ages." In early September, he accompanied the tribe on a buffalo hunt. Before beginning, "they halt[ed] for a moment, and in *imitation* of the Flat-Heads, all [were] seen on their knees to beg of Almighty God their daily bread."⁴⁶ This unique occurrence affords several explanations. Most simply, the Blackfeet converted. A more likely course might suggest that the tribe selected the useful portions of Christianity that they believed would help them in their daily needs. After all, the Blackfeet had always prayed to the Great Spirit before and after a hunt for good fortune, to show respect, and to give thanks for success. The prayer offered by the Blackfeet, and thus the extent to which they were Christianized, must be qualified by their prior and subsequent actions. The majority of their previous responses suggested little accord with the Jesuits' ideology, and ensuing events indicated a retooling or redefinition rather than indiscriminate acceptance.⁴⁷

Further issues clouded the success of De Smet and his missionaries. He recognized that peace and conversion went hand in hand, but very often failed to accomplish the former goal and thus weakened the latter. The dictates of survival often overrode the Jesuit mission. The Flathead and Blackfeet, as well as several other tribes, converged on the plains just east of the Rockies for their fall buffalo hunts. The success of the hunt determined their ability to make it through the rest of the year, but the Blackfeet often regarded the Flathead as "poachers and attacked them at every opportunity." In that sense, making peace seemed almost impossible.⁴⁸

After the hunt of 1846, the Flathead returned with an entirely different attitude toward the Jesuits. Apparently, the tribe felt deeply hurt by the departure of De Smet for the East. His removal sharpened an already growing sense of betrayal. The Jesuit's attempt to Christianize the Blackfeet, "in the Flathead eyes, was treason." For them, Christianity offered protective powers, a leg up on their enemies. Offering the "armor of Christianity" to the Blackfeet put the two tribes on equal terms once again, and the past had shown that the Blackfeet had far superior numbers and success in battle. For the Flathead, "to control Christianity was to control their means of survival." The symbolic and practical nature of religion for the Flathead begs the question if the "Christian Indians" were really much different than the Blackfeet?⁴⁹

The relations among the Black Robes, Flathead, and Blackfeet between 1841 and 1846 symbolized the difficulty of translating cultural ideologies. Two worlds clashed and the prospects remained as unclear as ever. Even the mis-

sionaries' favorite Flathead pupils "still had their blemishes." Father Point realized that "wheat grows with chaff in this world, and virtue is never pure," but the converts' failings made him "loath to reveal the catalogue of their woe-ful deeds." The whole experiment hung on the edge of a precipice. The hostility of the Blackfeet, the encroachment of whites, and an already noticeable depletion in the numbers of buffalo foreshadowed mounting troubles. Father Point, just as De Smet before him, knew that all hopes depended on converting the Blackfeet. The continued "spiritual prosperity" of St. Mary's and the ultimate proof of Christianity hinged on that "most notorious of all the wild tribes."⁵⁰

THE FALL OF 1846 AND AFTERMATH

The period between September 1846 and the autumn of 1847 represented the most distressing span of relations between the Blackfeet and Black Robes. The Jesuits saw both the peak of possibilities and an endeavor wrought with despair. A plethora of mixed messages burdened their efforts. The period fittingly coincided with the end of both De Smet's and Point's work in the West.⁵¹ This short span of diligence signaled the last best hope for transforming the Blackfeet. As De Smet concluded, the task required the "zeal of an apostle... to wrest them from the soul-destroying idolatry in which they are plunged... and to teach them the consolatory truths of the Divine Redeemer of mankind." He agonizingly wondered what would become of them if the mission failed. Without success, he surmised, "the last drop of aboriginal blood [would] indelibly stain the fair fame of the Spread Eagle [United States], under whose protecting wing they are said to live. Justice makes the appeal."⁵²

The promise of peace and prayer ran through the events of mid-September. De Smet had managed to bring the Flathead and Blackfeet to accord, at least for the moment. For the missionaries, the laying down of arms was a "consoling triumph for religion...[an] Exhaltation of the Holy Cross." On 15 September 1846, two thousand Flathead, Nez Perce, Gros Ventres, Piegan, Blood, and Blackfeet proper gathered with the priests to hear mass. The unanimity was remarkable and it appeared "as if their ancient deadly feuds had been long since buried in oblivion." Yet De Smet remained doubtful about this sudden change, musing, "How long will this last? May Heaven strengthen their present good-will, and grant them perseverance."⁵³

In the next ten days, the Black Robes witnessed a number of signs that held out hope. A war party of Blood Indians, who had sixty of their children baptized by a missionary in Saskatchewan, informed De Smet that they considered Black Robes sacred.⁵⁴ De Smet managed to assuage long-term hostilities between a Piegan chief and his "mortal enemy, a Blood Indian chieftain." De Smet insisted on reconciliation between the Piegan bent upon revenge and the Blood with "savage vengeance visibly lurking in his breast." The Father, in his estimation, worked a miracle and the mortal enemies ended their hostilities with a brotherly embrace. With such transformations, De Smet looked toward a bright future among the Blackfeet.⁵⁵

Father Point did not always envision the same prospects. If anything, he was a realistic missionary, and the path of practicality often led directly away from Christianity. His mission among the Blackfeet bordered on doubt, indiscretion, and superstition. Point's uncertainty subdued his efforts. He lamented, "For just as weak eyes dazzled by the sun seem to see its images in the most insignificant objects long after the sun has disappeared, so these infirm intellects, having lost the idea of the true God, thought to see the divinity where its shadow scarcely even extended." Point called into question the whole validity of the Christian message.⁵⁶

The divergence between God and the Great Spirit came to sharp focus in Point's efforts with the Blackfeet. The "Manitou," "spirit," and the "cult they practiced... called medicine" overrode all his divine intentions with the tribe. He reduced the Blackfeet "medicine" to three types: "medicine of utility, or the power to acquire... the greatest possible abundance of things necessary for life"; "medicine of ostentation, or the power to dazzle the eyes of others" by tricks; and, "medicine of malice, or the power to do injury to the persons or fortunes of others." The first medicine, "by fattening the savage at little expense," encouraged laziness and brute appetites. The second caused maldistribution of wealth and caused everyone to be a "slave to cupidity." The third nourished "vainglory and self-importance," perpetuating the "stupid confidence of those who [were] prey to it." The Blackfeet represented all the deadly sins: "sloth, gluttony, lust, covetousness, envy, cruelty, vengeance, [and] pride." These deformities were the "natural effects of the medicine." But the excessive immorality also promised the hope of an opening for Catholicism; the Lord had his chosen few. As Point concluded, "He partially revealed Himself, planting... in the midst of their wilderness, landmarks intended to point ... the way to His great mercy." Tribal customs and Point's negativity ruined these hopes.⁵⁷

Though the spiritual beliefs of the Blackfeet and Black Robes intersected in some general ways, the Jesuits failed to decipher their foreign ideas in a positive manner. De Smet translated prayers with the help of a young interpreter, but the boy, "having no more steadfastness than knowledge, preferred playing truant to acting as interpreter." To the fathers, the men "had neither the docility nor the constancy of the Flatheads," the women "thought more of the sacrifices with which religion menaced them than of the advantages they might realize," and the children "were impressed only with examples of an immediately sensible nature."⁵⁸

The problems of translating words and ideas only represented the beginning of contradictions. The Christian heaven proved incompatible with the beliefs of the Blackfeet. The "happiness of heaven" simply did not live up to all the Jesuits' promises. Where were the buffalo, the "pleasures of good meat, of the calumet, of good conversation"? The Jesuit heaven seemed ephemeral and indistinct, while the Blackfeet could specifically point to the sand hills of Espatchekie as the location of their afterlife. Even more disconcerting was the lack of coherence between the powers of medicine men and Christianity. Point complained, "Perhaps never before did the Blackfeet medicine men talk so much about their prowess as during the days when we spoke of morals

and religion.” The Indians wanted something concrete from the missionaries. The questions of the Blackfeet and their medicine men represented a challenge to authority, an attempt to reveal who had the true power and access to knowledge. Yet the medicine men often proved unable to reproduce their “outlandish miracles” for the Jesuits, opening a door to the “true prayer.” However, the incompatibility of the two worldviews and the lack of logical explanations greatly weakened the missionaries’ arguments.⁵⁹

The rite of baptism revealed all of Father Point’s doubts about the Blackfeet. He concluded that nothing short of a miracle from God would produce the conversion of “those poor Indians.” Baptism became the means for ensuring prowess in battle. This explained “why some wretches, who seek only to kill their neighbors, were the first to petition for baptism.” Point concluded that the desire for baptism by the Blackfeet became a shortcut to thinking. The actions of the Jesuits and the Christian Flatheads led the Blackfeet to “think that all other imaginable blessings will come to them; not only courage to fight, but also every species of remedy to enable them to enjoy corporate wealth.” Point’s nearly seven hundred baptisms included only twenty-six adults. Yet Point lamented that the adults “rarely showed the moral dispositions required for the licit administration of the sacrament.” In short, their “desires were not ... sufficiently imbued with the true principles of Religion.” Just as the Jesuits had received vaccinations before going west, the Blackfeet brought their children to the priests for the spiritual inoculation of baptism. Baptism took on a revised meaning; it no longer carried the Christian intent, but signified a pragmatic defense against death.⁶⁰

The interpretations of the cross also revealed the troubling ambiguities between the beliefs of the Blackfeet and Black Robes. In the 1830s, Maximilian of Wied related a tale of his journeys that revealed the cross as a badge of market relations. He traveled with two Blackfeet guides, Kiasax and Matsokui. Kiasax often “wrapped himself in a Spanish blanket ... as well as a cross, which he wore round his neck [and] was a proof of the intercourse between the Blackfeet Indians and the Spaniards near the Rocky Mountains.”⁶¹

For some Blackfeet, the cross physically symbolized religion’s role as a defense mechanism in battle. While this combined view of spiritual strength and physical prowess had roots in their own religious customs, Father Point made Christianity inseparable from violence and social status. He presented crosses to a number of chiefs “as marks of distinction, and explained to them their signification, exhorting them, when in danger, to invoke the Son of God, whose image they bore, and to place all their confidence in him.” Later, with their backs against the wall in a battle, one of the chiefs recalled the cross he carried with him and the Black Gown’s words. Reminding his warriors of these symbols, they all shouted, “It is our only chance of safety.” The war party made it past their enemies without suffering one casualty. The chief concluded with great “energy and feeling: ‘Yes, the prayer of the Son of God is the only good and powerful one; we all desire to become worthy of it, and to adopt it.’” The latter part of this statement, interpreted and recorded by Point, obscured the former. If the second portion contained validity—that they wanted to be

Christians—then using faith in battle suggests they would do so through their own interpretation. Religion and the cross as symbols became one part of a repertoire of defense for these Blackfeet.⁶²

The cross as symbol signified varying ideologies. The emblem took on meaning beyond, and quite apart from, the spiritual message intended by the Jesuits. For many Blackfeet, the cross came to represent not only power in battle or commercial supremacy, but a sign requiring respect. Traveling through the perilous country of the Blackfeet, Captain J. Cooke and some miners, “all non-Catholics,” came across a “large party of savages.” In that moment of trepidation, a few of the Indians “caught sight of something like a cross, hanging from Captain Cooke’s watch-guard.” Recalling that a fur trader had told him the sign of the cross was a “safeguard in such an emergency,” Cooke “blessed himself with great solemnity before the crowd of redskins.” “The savages,” Cooke later recounted, “who up to that moment had blood in their eyes and murder in their hearts, became friendly: they shook hands with him and his companions and bade them to go their way unmolested.” According to one cleric, the Blackfeet massacred other whites “who did not know or made no use of the secret.” Despite the mythical quality of this story, it implied that the cross became a tool for both Indian and white. While the account might suggest that the Blackfeet had taken the “True Faith” to heart, it more likely indicated that the cross became one figurative aspect of the tribes’ larger worldview.⁶³

Another episode cemented the profane meaning of the cross. Just before departing the Flathead mission for good, Point erected a cross on a hill near their village. A few days later, a hunter discovered a similar cross with a banner attached to it. Point thought that a missionary had planted it without his knowledge, but the Flatheads corrected this mistake. They informed Point that the Blackfeet often erected crosses to the moon to gain favor in thievery and the hunt. The explanation discouraged the Jesuit. He lamented, “This information dispelled the pleasing fancies in which I had indulged, and painfully reminded me that the God-Saviour is yet far from being adored in these wild abodes.” Though still optimistic that the “true cross” might someday “wave triumphant,” Point recognized that Christianization had yet made little progress.⁶⁴

These vignettes suggest another explanation for the role of the cross in Blackfeet culture during this period. The various uses and views of the cross signal a similarity to medicine bundles. Like the medicine bundle, the cross may have represented both religious symbol and commodity item. The Blackfeet viewed bundles as an “investment for prestige” and displaying wealth.⁶⁵ Just as the bundle carried commercial value, it also had medicine, or power. The medicine bundle endowed the owner with authority in battle, in tribal social relationships, and within the family. In a similar fashion, the cross possibly became a trade item that many Blackfeet wished to own and use as a means for procuring “supernatural” power in theft, the hunt, and war. The Blackfeet were shrewd “businessmen” in the economic and spiritual market.⁶⁶

Father Nicolas Point left Flathead and Blackfeet country a humbled missionary. Conditions declined at St. Mary’s and the mission closed at the end

of 1849. The Jesuits blamed various factors, but focused on the prolonged conflict with the Blackfeet.⁶⁷ Point had requested permission to go to Canada as early as the spring of 1845, longing for less wild environs and the company of civilized French Jesuits. His final report depicted “deplorable conditions” in the Blackfeet camps. With every passing year the tribe found an ever-diminishing number of buffalo, the land seemed too barren for cultivation, and the Indians had shown little interest in the missionaries’ prompting for farming anyway. Without the cornerstones of Christianity and civilization, without the guiding influences of religion and agriculture, Point surmised the Blackfeet had “no alternative other than exile or death.” These concerns proved inimical to the prospects of a mission in the near future. It would take more than a decade for the Jesuits to return, make any considerable headway among the Blackfeet, and establish a mission.⁶⁸

CONCLUSIONS

By the 1850s, the relationship between the Black Robes and the Blackfeet seemed to have come full circle. The same desires, doubts, and difficulties defined the efforts at bringing the two worlds together. De Smet estimated the entire Catholic Indian population east of the Rockies at a mere 6,000, including 2,800 Osage and Pottawatomie and the rest of the number mainly children. Roughly 70,000 Indians of “great tribes,” plus at least 12,000 Blackfeet, awaited the Jesuit message and continued to live in a state of “frequent and bloody” warfare. Although the Blackfoot Treaty of 1855 endorsed peace among the tribes of the upper Missouri, missionaries in the field doubted its efficacy for more than a short duration. Epidemic diseases revisited the Blackfeet and other tribes, “making terrible ravages,” “scourging men,” and then falling upon their horses. Unwilling to accept defeat, the Jesuits continued to believe that a mission, and the message that went with it, remained the only viable solution to the tenuous situation.⁶⁹

Father Nicolas Point best embodied the conflicting emotions and disappointment characteristic of the affairs between the Black Robes and the Blackfeet. In 1854, he ruminated, “The interior movement which draws me to them is so imperious that I should think myself doing violence to the will of Heaven if I did not renew the offers I had already made to all my Superiors in regard to this mission.” His zeal waned with the passage of time, becoming a distant and disenchanting lament. Six years later, now in the third person, Point confessed, “Nothing has made it possible for him [Point] to forget the Rocky Mountains; they are at the bottom of all his thoughts; their cries have gone deep into his soul. If he forgets them he has reason to fear, so it seems to him, that God may forget him.” Failure became a nagging sin on Point’s soul. His faith crumbled beneath the weight of a persistent Blackfeet worldview.⁷⁰

Despite Point’s melancholy, life was certainly changing on the northern plains, for the better and the worse. While many white immigrants, traders, and missionaries were a bit precocious in spelling the end of an Indian worldview, boundless factors had irreparably changed life on the plains. Historians

must be careful about analyzing the trade in goods as a cross-cultural exchange of values. The failure of the Jesuit vision of reaping a “harvest of souls” laid bare the endurance of Blackfeet spirituality. Translating ideology resembled the transference of material goods in profound ways. The Blackfeet accepted ideas and material items in a similar fashion; the tribe exercised a selectivity that filtered the intellectual and material merchandise of whites and transformed it for Indian practices.

Conclusions about the Jesuits and the Blackfeet have often centered on the heroism and moral fortitude of the missionaries, ignoring the polarity of the relationship. While the Black Robes came as “harbingers of peace,” they also exacerbated intertribal hostilities. One scholar argued that the Jesuits “laid their hearts” at the “foot of the Mission Cross,” representing “an acceptable holocaust for the salvation of the Rocky Mountain Indians.” Granted, the Jesuits made great sacrifices to mediate the Christian message, but many more Indians lost their lives and portions of long-held customs in the turmoil of the times. Others have correctly contended that “Christianity preceded civilization among the Indians in Montana.” Yet, by concentrating on the “principal truths of Christianity,” these scholars neglected the Indian point of view.⁷¹ In short, they failed to answer an important question, God or the Great Spirit? The simple answer is both. The Blackfeet utilized certain Christian principles in a wider scheme of beliefs that demonstrated their adaptability to the shifting social, political, environmental, and economic landscape. Some Christian symbols and practices became a means for making sense of the world and inviting aid in defense against their travails. For the Blackfeet, the focal point was not choosing sides, but finding the means to survive.

Like many endeavors in Native American history, the predominance of Anglo sources makes it difficult to interpret the Blackfeet point of view. However, the evidence suggests that scholars may have overemphasized “cultural brokerage” between the tribe and whites. The available evidence offers another, and not altogether uncomplementary, storyline.⁷² The conflict and conversation between the Black Robes and the Blackfeet implies that the tribe took the white morals, materials, and mindset for what they were: another option or tool to be shaped and molded into their own native views. But, at least until the 1850s, the issue of God or the Great Spirit had the most relevance when reconciled with practical experience.

NOTES

1. The translation of De Smet’s writings are reproduced in multiple forms and sources but with the same general meaning. Pierre Jean De Smet as quoted in Cornelius M. Buckley, ed., *Nicolas Point, S.J.: His Life & Northwest Indian Chronicles* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989), 246.

2. Some historians deal with the issue in larger narratives of the tribe (see end-note 4), but see specifically Howard L. Harrod, *Mission Among the Blackfeet* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

3. Scholars of the Blackfeet have seldom dealt with the issue of syncretism versus pragmatism in regard to the Blackfeet and Christianity. For examples of and approach-

es to the concept of cultural brokerage see Margaret Connell Szasz, ed., *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); and Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For the conflict between cultural relativists and rationalists see Bruce G. Trigger, “Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations,” *Journal of American History* 77 (March 1991): 1195–1215.

4. This is by no means a full narrative of the relations between the Blackfeet and the Jesuits. Many historians and scholars have lengthily detailed the history of the tribe; see John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1955); John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958); George Bird Grinnell, *Pawnee, Blackfoot, and Cheyenne: History and Folklore of the Plains* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961). For Blackfeet–Jesuit relations, see Buckley, *Nicolas Point, S.J.*, and Harrod, *Mission Among the Blackfeet*.

5. “Black Robes” and “Black Gowns” were both used by missionaries, traders, and Indians to describe the Jesuits.

6. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, vol. 27, 131, see also, Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 2 (1902; reprint, Fairfield, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley, 1976), 838; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846*, vol. 23 (Columbus, OH: Arthur H. Clark, 1906), 96; Mary Afra White, “Catholic Indian Missionary Influence in the Development of Catholic Education in Montana, 1840–1903” (Ph. D. diss., St. Louis University, 1940), 6.

7. The Piegans resided in the Montana region, while the Blood and Blackfeet proper more often made their home north of the border. War parties of the three tribes scoured the area from the plains of Saskatchewan to the Yellowstone River of Montana. Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 5; Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 16; Lawrence B. Palladino, *Indian and White in the Northwest: A History of Catholicity in Montana, 1831–1891* (1893; reprint, Lancaster, PA: Wickersham, 1922), 185–7; Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 23, 96; Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, 841.

8. Elliott Coues, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833–1872*, Vol. 1 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1898), 8, 8 n. 13, 30 n. 18, 90.

9. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 22, 300, and vol. 23, 96.

10. Coues, *Forty Years*, vol. 1, 112, 109, 109–11 n. 4.

11. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 22, 377, and vol. 24, 317; Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, vol. 2, 839.

12. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 24, 317, and vol. 23, 96; Coues, *Forty Years*, vol. 1, 91.

13. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, vol. 2, 664; W. A. Ferris, *Life in The Rocky Mountains*, ed. Paul C. Phillips (Denver: Old West Publishing, 1940), 130, 146–7, 183–4; Patricia Albers, “Symbiosis, Merger, and War: Contrasting Forms of Intertribal Relationship Among Historic Plains Indians,” in *The Political Economy of North American Indians*, ed. John H. Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 122–7.

14. Compared to the recovery of other Missouri River tribes, the Blackfeet were lucky. “[So] rapidly did the Blackfeet recover population–wise that seventeen years

after the terrific loss Edwin T. Denig ... estimated their numbers were only one-third less than they had been before the smallpox epidemic.” Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 66.

15. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, vol. 2, 612–19; Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper, or, Nine Years in the Rocky Mountains, 1834–43* (Boise: Syms–York, 1921), 89; Malone et al., *Montana*, 59; Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 65–6.

16. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, Jesuit Charles Van Quickenborne carried his message to the Osage, Pottawatomie, Chippewa, and Ottawa, all recently removed to Missouri Territory. In the same period, Catholic missionaries in the Red River region often accompanied the Chippewa and Assiniboines on fall buffalo hunts that ranged into the eastern periphery of Blackfeet country. John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Missions Among the Indian Tribes of the United States, 1529–1854* (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1854), 454 n., 458; John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States*, vol. 3 (New York: John G. Shea, 1890), 691; Mary Aquinas Norton, *Catholic Missionary Activities in the Northwest, 1818–1864* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1930), 91–3.

17. Shea argues that the Flathead became “Christian in heart as early as 1820,” but this is unlikely in light of other historical evidence. Shea, *History of the Catholic Missions*, 467.

18. Ferris, *The American Fur Trade*, 88–90;

19. Different accounts either give credence to Indians or to whites for encouraging the Flathead’ desire for Christianity, which was first planted by the Iroquois. Most likely, it was both. Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, vol. 2, 636–7.

20. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, vol. 2, 636–7; A. M. Jung, *Jesuit Missions Among the American Tribes of the Rocky Mountain Indians* (Spokane: Gonzaga University, 1925), 5–6; Daniel Lee and Joseph Frost, *Ten Years in Oregon* (1844; reprint, Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1968), 127; Shea, *History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 3, 694, and vol. 4, 309; Shea, *History of the Catholic Missions*, 459.

21. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 23, 122, and vol. 24, 218.

22. The description of De Smet is found in Wilfred P. Schoenberg, “Historic St. Peter’s Mission: Landmark of the Jesuits and the Ursulines Among the Blackfeet,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 11 (Winter 1961): 70. Shea, *History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 4, 312–13; Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 27, 136; White, “Catholic Indian,” 23; Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, vol. 2, 635.

23. Shea, *History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 4, 313; Jung, *Jesuit Missions*, 7, 9; Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 27, 132, 136, 144–6.

24. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 27, 144–9, 151.

25. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 27, 151–2; Norton, *Catholic Missionary Activities*, 84.

26. Jung, *Jesuit Missions*, 7.

27. Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre–Jean De Smet, S.J., 1801–1873*, vol. 1 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1905), 328–9.

28. Albert J. Partoll, ed., “Mengarini’s Narrative of the Rockies: Memoirs of Old Oregon, 1841–1850, and St. Mary’s Mission,” *Sources of Northwest History* 25 (Missoula: State University of Montana, 1938); reprint, *Frontier and Midland* 18:3–4 (1938), 18, see also Shea, *History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 3, 695, and vol. 4, 313; Shea, *History of the Catholic Missions*, 468.

29. Partoll, “Mengarini’s Narrative,” 3, 8, 9, 17 n.41.

30. Point noted that "The Pend d'Oreille and the Flathead comprise one nation in the eyes of the Flatheads," Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 250–253.
31. Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 250–3; and see also, Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 27, 317–18.
32. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 27, 284–6.
33. *Ibid.*, 286–8.
34. *Ibid.*, 350–2.
35. There is disagreement over the exact date of this unfortunate occurrence. Most descriptions place the events leading up to the massacre and the massacre itself within a span of time between 1842 and 1844.
36. Coues, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, 215–19.
37. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, vol. 1, 371. For secondary explanations of the Blackfeet Massacre, see Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 66–7, and Malone, et al., *Montana*, 57.
38. Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 256–7; Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 408–19.
39. Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 279–99, 301 n. 4, 268; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, vol. 2, 526–30; Albers, 105–6.
40. Gilbert J. Garraghan, *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, vol. 2 (New York: American Press, 1938), 332; Pierre Jean De Smet, *Oregon Missions and Travels Over the Rocky Mountains in 1845–46* (New York: Edward Dunigan, 1847), 147–9; Thwaites, vol. 29, 234–5.
41. Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, vol. 2, 524; Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 236–8, 241–2.
42. There is disagreement about this band, the "Petite Robe." De Smet reports that they were destroyed, while Larpenteur mentions them on the warpath in 1848. See Coues, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, vol. 2, 259–60.
43. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 242–4.
44. De Smet translated the Lord's Prayer for the Blackfeet, but it reflects the views of the Jesuits more than that of the Indians; for the translation see De Smet, *Oregon Missions*, appendix; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, vol. 2, 589; Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 331–3.
45. Thwaites' version of this battle interpreted the Blackfeet as greatly "influenced by a feeling of their safety while they fought in company with the Flat-Head Christians." See Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 328–336. Also see Schoenberg, "Historic St. Peter's Mission," 69; Gilbert J. Garraghan, *Chapters in Frontier History: Research Studies in the Making of the West* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1934), 142–3; Garraghan, *The Jesuits*, vol. 2, 333, 445.
46. My emphasis. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 349.
47. Point recounts an almost exact rendition of a buffalo hunt. Whether it was the same hunt, or two different ones tinged with the same spiritual interpretation is unclear; see *Nicolas Point*, *Wilderness Kingdom: Indian Life in the Rocky Mountains, 1840–1847*, ed. and trans. Joseph P. Donnelly (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), 195–8; also see Garraghan, *The Jesuits*, vol. 2, 445–6; Chittenden and Richardson, vol. 2, 947–8.
48. It was not until the Blackfoot Treaty of 1855 that the tribe legitimately conceded hunting privileges to other tribes.
49. Forbis went so far as to comment, "Although De Smet had lived with the Flathead for five years, he apparently did not appreciate the fact that the Indians were not particularly interested in the moral and non-material aspects of Christianity."

Richard Forbis, "The Flathead Apostasy: An Interpretation," *Montana Magazine of History* 1 (Oct. 1951): 37–9; and also see Partoll, "Mengarini's Narrative," 17 n. 41.

50. Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 270, 275.

51. One caveat—De Smet returned at the request of the federal government in the 1870s. Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, vol. 2, 859.

52. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 364–5.

53. *Ibid.*, 353–8.

54. Jesuits Jean B. Thibault and Joseph Bourassa conducted missionary work in the Red River country from 1833 to 1856.

55. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 358–9, 358 n. 207, 231 n. 122, 362–4.

56. Point, *Wilderness Kingdom*, 15.

57. *Ibid.*, 15, 18.

58. *Ibid.*, 202.

59. *Ibid.*, 202–4.

60. Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, 951–3; Garraghan, *The Jesuits*, vol. 2, 447–8, 450; Garraghan, *Chapters*, 145–9, 149n.

61. This suggests that the cross had been a symbol of something other than Christianity among the Blackfeet earlier than anticipated by the Jesuits. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 22, 367.

62. Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, vol. 2, 773.

63. Palladino commented that the cross "in the form of a breast-pin or a watch-charm" became the white man's "best protection from attack." Palladino, *Indian and White*, 190–1.

64. Thwaites, *Early Western Travel*, vol. 29, 405–6.

65. Oscar Lewis argued that evidence of Blackfeet medicine bundles first became pronounced in the 1830s, and the "commercialism in bundle transfers" set the "Blackfeet apart from other Plains groups" in the period after 1830. Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade*, Monographs of the American Ethnological Society (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1942), 45–6.

66. Ruth Benedict described the concept of the medicine bundle in Blackfeet culture as an "idea that the blessing of spirits may be bought and sold." While the cross played a much lesser role compared to the bundles, the use of the cross indicated a similar combination of economic and religious function. Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact*, 43–6; Ruth Benedict, "The Vision in Plains Culture," *American Anthropologist* 24 (January–March 1922): 17–18.

67. They also cited the demoralizing influence of traders and other "unscrupulous whites," and absence from the mission for prolonged periods to hunt buffalo. The mission did not reopen until 1866. Partoll, "Mengarini's Narrative," 19; White, "Catholic Indian Missionary Influence," 49–51.

68. Garraghan, *The Jesuits*, vol. 2, 450–4; Buckley, *Nicolas Point*, 336, 340–1 n. 2; Garraghan, *Chapters*, 143.

69. Garraghan, *The Jesuits*, vol. 2, 442–3, 452–3; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, vol. 4, 1247–8, 1317.

70. Garraghan, *Chapters*, 156.

71. Norton, *Catholic Missionary Activities*, 138–9; Jung, *Jesuit Missions*, 30; White, "Catholic Indian Missionary Influence," 190.

72. As Trigger suggests, a rationalistic or relativist approach need not exclude the other. Both methods offer insights into understanding Native behavior and culture; Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses," 1210, 1213.