

Études d'histoire religieuse



Raymond-J.-A. Huel, *Proclamaing the gospel to the indians and the métis*, Edmonton, The university of Alberta Press, 1996, xxvii, 387 p.

Jennifer Reid

Volume 64, 1998

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006645ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006645ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Société canadienne d'histoire de l'Église catholique

ISSN

1193-199X (imprimé)

1920-6267 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Reid, J. (1998). Compte rendu de [Raymond-J.-A. Huel, *Proclamaing the gospel to the indians and the métis*, Edmonton, The university of Alberta Press, 1996, xxvii, 387 p.] *Études d'histoire religieuse*, 64, 87–88.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1006645ar>

Le livre est parfait, je trouve, parce qu'il coule d'une générosité sans complaisance, et parce qu'il dit ce qui était à dire.

Nicole Gagnon,
Département de sociologie,
Université Laval.

* * *

Raymond-J.-A. Huel, *Proclaiming the gospel to the indians and the métis*, Edmonton, The university of Alberta Press, 1996, xxvii, 387 p.

Raymond Huel's book (the third volume in the Western Oblate History Project) is an introductory study of Oblate missionary activity in the Prairie provinces from the time of the Order's arrival at Red River in 1845. According to Huel, the Oblates wished to "make the indigenous inhabitants of the Northwest conform to a preconceived image of the ideal Christian society and culture," (xvii) and were consequently forced to deal not only with aboriginal peoples, but with the Hudson's Bay Company, Protestant competitors, religious communities of women, and the Federal Government. *Proclaiming the Gospel* focuses on the complexity of these relationships and the ways in which they impacted upon the adaptation of Oblate missionary activity.

Chapters one and two consider the historical, procedural, and philosophical background of the Order; and outline the history of Roman Catholic presence in the Northwest from 1818 until the 1850's, when permanent Oblate missions were established.

The next three chapters concern early adaptation of Oblate methods in the Northwest. These included an increased necessity for language proficiency; adaptation of missions to better correspond to the lifestyle of the native population; the introduction of itinerant ministering; the necessity for "accelerated" ordinations; the creation of new pedagogical tools; and the need for priests to engage in their own subsistence activities. Huel then explores the way in which the Oblates discovered that the sacramental framework of the Roman Catholic Church constituted a stark cultural contrast to many aboriginal practices and norms.

The three chapters that follow outline the Oblates' progressive involvement in the field of native education. The author argues that both Oblate ventures into native agriculture and the creation of industrial and residential schools were products of their assumption of cultural superiority; and that, by the 1930's, it was becoming evident to many Oblates that they were not exacting the lasting transformation they desired. The final chapters pursue this problem through to the 1930's and 1940's, noting that despite concerted

Oblate effort to promote native interests with the federal government, their relationship with the aboriginal community left much to be desired. From 1885, the native population increasingly moved from offensive to defensive strategies in dealing with the colonial experience (e.g., the creation of the League of Indians). The canonical report of 1935 reflected this situation as it called for a more reciprocal relationship with aboriginal peoples. Ruel concludes with reflections on the impact of both increased aboriginal self-determination in the latter part of this century, and the Second Vatican Council on the Oblates.

It is an ambitious project that, for the most part, constitutes solid scholarship. Huel's arguments lapse, however, when he endeavours to confront what he acknowledges to be an important methodological issue relating to the meaning of missionization for aboriginal peoples. While admitting that its full exploration is beyond the scope of his project, his somewhat discretionary decision to incorporate interpretations of Canadian historians and ethnohistorians (James Axtell, Bruce Trigger, John Grant) into his analysis renders his explanations (particularly in chapters 4 and 5) somewhat wanting. Although these scholars have countered traditionally ethnocentric readings of Canadian history, their work in relation to religion among colonized peoples has been produced in relative isolation from that of a number of anthropologists and historians of religion concerned specifically with this issue. Huel's consideration of the economic nature of conversions, for instance, (chapter 4) is bound by interpretations of economic exchange that fail to take account of scholarship that has explored the religious meaning of reciprocity in non-Western cultures. The significance of exchange and European commodities for colonized societies has received substantial scholarly consideration (e.g., Kenelm Burridge's *Mambu*, Charles H. Long's *Significations*), much of which is conspicuously absent from the work of Axtell, Trigger, and Grant.

Despite this shortcoming, Huel has mined hitherto untapped Oblate archival resources in order to account for the evolution of Oblate practice during the century that followed their arrival at Red River; and he has considered (in an extremely sensitive manner) the role and responsibility of the Oblates in the meeting of European and First Nations peoples in Canada. The subject is topical; and this book will clearly prove to be a valuable resource for further research.

Jennifer Reid,
University of Maine at Farmington.

* * *