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**“A Confirmation of the Voice of the People”: Christianity and the Iroquois  
Confederacy, 1642-1783**

**I. Introduction: The Lying Dutchman**

“Now I am greatly surprised  
And, therefore I shall use it --  
The power of my War Song.  
I am of the Five Nations  
And I shall make supplication  
To the Almighty Creator.  
He has furnished this army.  
My warriors shall be mighty  
In the strength of the Creator.  
Between him and my song they are  
For it was he who gave the song  
This war song that I sing!”  
- War Song, *Constitution of the Iroquois Nations*<sup>1</sup>

In 1649, a Dutch missionary named Johannes Megapolensis completed his tenure as pastor in the territory known as Rensselaerswyck, now part of upstate New York. During his seven-year leadership, he had come across many Iroquois, and had quickly

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation, Circa 1500

been outsmarted by them. Megapolensis preached a traditional Christian message against “sins of theft, drunkenness, lewdness, and murder<sup>2</sup>,” only to find that the native Iroquois were as inquisitive as any white skeptic: “Why do so many Christians do these things<sup>3</sup>?” they replied. Like many preachers, Megapolensis had no good answer. “When we pray they laugh at us<sup>4</sup>,” he wrote, and it is easy to see why.

When the Europeans came to North America in the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Iroquois Confederacy was already well-established. The Five Nations, as it was called, referred to the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca, five Indian tribes (and later, a sixth: the Tuscarora) that lived throughout what is now New York and parts of Pennsylvania<sup>5</sup>. Because the Native American concept of history does not match up very well with its European counterpart, it is difficult to say whether Iroquois religion is older than Christianity, but it is arguably just as complex. Certain facets of Iroquois religion mirror Christianity to a great extent: a tripartite cosmology (sky, earth, underworld), two warring deities (Life and Death), and a belief in an immortal soul are as fundamental to Iroquois beliefs as they are to Christianity. However, the religion of the Iroquois contains just as much to make a devout Christian shudder: animal guardian spirits, agricultural idolatry, and a belief that the soul is a part of the body do not mesh quite so neatly with Christianity’s ideals<sup>6</sup>.

Even so, Christianity proved to be a strong influence on the Iroquois Confederacy. Most Iroquois now live on reservations in New York and Canada, and as one historian

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 106

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Megapolensis, *Short Account of the Mohawk Indians* (Charles Scriber's Sons, 1644) 178

<sup>4</sup> Megapolensis, 177

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence E. Sullivan *Native American Religions North America* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) 133

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, 133-137

points out, most of them are Christians<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps this is just a natural effect of Europeanization. After all, many Europeans came to the East coast of North America with proselytism in mind. However, many other Indian tribes across the country were far less receptive to Christianity.

Additionally, few other Indian tribes ended up playing such a pivotal role in the American war for independence. The American Revolution polarized the Iroquois Confederacy and caused a considerable split between patriot loyalist Indians. By the end of the revolution, many Iroquois had proven themselves to be true upholders of patriot or loyalist ideals, equal in every way to a European-American. While the individual Iroquois benefited (in the short term, at least) from their temporary near-white status, the Confederacy itself was broken and splintered almost beyond recognition<sup>8</sup>.

The Constitution of the Five Nations, which provided a strong set of democratic and spiritual laws to rule the Confederacy, is believed to have been drafted around 1500 CE<sup>9</sup>. Christian missionaries first began to arrive at Iroquois land in the 1640s. The Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution, was signed in 1783. In a time span of approximately 280 years, the Iroquois Confederacy went from being one of the most sophisticated, well-developed forms of government in the New World (if not the world at large), to a splintered mass of factions that would never fully recover.

For many Iroquois as individuals, Christianity brought spiritual enlightenment or assimilation with the burgeoning European population. As a people, however, Christianity may have destroyed, in a few hundred short years, the powerful Iroquois government that had taken millennia to build. Taken in conjunction with the current

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<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, 137

<sup>8</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 280

<sup>9</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation

religious status of the Iroquois, the facts suggest not only that the Iroquois were unusually receptive to Christianity, but that it was one of the major factors in the downfall of their Confederacy.

## **II. Missionaries: The Joy of Sects**

“Whether Catholic or Protestant, all Christians were exclusivist – insistent on a single religious Truth as revealed in the Bible... Not only this general idea but many specific Christian doctrines must have seemed strange to seventeenth-century Native Americans<sup>10</sup>,” historian Daniel K. Richter points out. Native Americans, the Iroquois included, were not only hostile to Christianity out of ethnocentricity, but literally unable to comprehend it due to everything from cultural practices to religious doctrine to grammatical language barriers<sup>11</sup>.

The missionary experience with the Dutch, as described by Father Megapolensis, was more or less a joke to the Iroquois. After Megapolensis left his position at Rensselaerswyck, a man named Gideon Schaets took his place. “Schaets, who allegedly drank too much and often quarreled with civil and parish leaders, was hardly a figure to inspire his Dutch flock, much less potential Indian converts<sup>12</sup>,” Richter states. The ridicule endured by Megapolensis compounded by the ineffectiveness of Schaets does not sound like the beginning of a story that ends with a Christianized Iroquois people.

The Dutch Reform, however, were only one of many religious groups who found their way to Iroquoia. French and English Catholics – Jesuits and otherwise – made strong religious footholds among the Iroquois, as did the Anglicans. The Catholics,

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel K. Richter, Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America (Harvard University Press 2001) 84-85

<sup>11</sup> Richter, Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America 85

<sup>12</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 106

particularly the Jesuits, were one of the most successful groups in converting the Iroquois. This was due in equal parts to the void left by the Dutch Reformers, the flexibility and intelligence of the Jesuits, and the efficient, hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church<sup>13</sup>.

No Indian religion in the United States embraced Christianity without some conflict or tension, and the Iroquois were no exception. In fact, even before Jesuits arrived in Iroquoia, the Iroquois expected their arrival thanks to information from nearby Huron Indians<sup>14</sup>. Some Iroquois waited to welcome these European visitors, and some resented the idea of a missionary religion. From this point of view, it is not difficult to imagine the Jesuits missionaries as the roots of an even greater split among the Iroquois 140 years in the making.

The Jesuits were famous all around the world for their attention to learning and their ability to adapt Catholicism to whatever culture they were proselytizing, from China to Illinois. “The Jesuit priests who founded the Iroquois missions... were the products of classical education in the best schools in Europe<sup>15</sup>,” writes historian William N. Fenton. Their success at ingraining themselves in Iroquois culture, then, should come as no surprise, nor should their success in converting many Iroquois.

Fenton points out how French Jesuit missionaries were more successful than their English or Dutch counterparts for a very simple reason: the phonetics of the French language lent themselves more favorably to learning the language of the Iroquois<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> James Axtell and James P. Ronda, Indian Missions: A Critical Bibliography (Indiana University Press, 1978) 13

<sup>14</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 107

<sup>15</sup> William N. Fenton The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 248

<sup>16</sup> Fenton, 248

Converting people becomes exponentially simpler if the missionaries can communicate with them.

Like Jesuits everywhere else in the world, in Iroquoia, “Jesuits won support on the basis of diplomatic, political, and religious considerations that were essentially Indian and traditional rather than European and Christian,” Richter explains<sup>17</sup>. The Jesuits won many converts through Indian veneers on traditional European knowledge: they impressed the Iroquois with their knowledge of astronomy and medicine. They were also quick to adapt the Iroquois Condolence Ceremony to contain a more Christian message – something the Iroquois did not mind as long as the basic tenets remained unchanged<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the Jesuits were willing to pray with the Iroquois during war preparations, and many Iroquois viewed Christianity as just another spiritual tool to use for themselves or against their enemies<sup>19</sup>.

John Gilmary Shea, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian and devout Catholic, had a far more invested perspective on Catholicism among the American Indians, but described the French Jesuit missionary experience in much the same way: “[Since] they were to discuss not peace and war, not things of earth and time, but of eternity, he unfolded his symbolic presents, and explained them in Indian style<sup>20</sup>.” Even among Catholics, the acknowledgment of the tradition of immersion is clear.

However, while immersion in Iroquois culture may have led to a higher rate of conversion, not all Iroquois were happy to accept these missionaries into their lands. The

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel K. Richter, “Iroquois Versus Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642-1686,” *Ethnohistory* 32.1 (1995): 4

<sup>18</sup> Fenton,, 249-252

<sup>19</sup> Richter, “Iroquois Versus Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642-1686” 4-7

<sup>20</sup> John Gilmary Shea, *Catholic Missions Among the Indian Tribes of the United States* (E. Dunigan & brother, 1855)

Iroquois did not believe that spiritual power was relegated to one god or one religion: just as Iroquois shamans possessed it, so too did Jesuit priests. Spiritual power could be used for good or for evil, and the Iroquois had every reason to be suspicious of the priests. Jesuits locked their doors, did not freely share their possessions, practiced ceremonies that looked like witchcraft, spread disease (like all Europeans), and killed Indians through baptism (priests would usually only give baptism to dying Indians)<sup>21</sup>. While Iroquois resistance to Christianity gradually decreased and indeed, most Iroquois became Christian, the process took over 350 years, and is still ongoing today.

While it would be both simplistic and fallacious to suggest that the eventual split that disbanded the Confederacy happened along Christian/Iroquois religious lines, this was the first time the Iroquois had come across a polarizing issue with only two sides. With five (and later six) nations, the Iroquois constantly faced factionalism and internal politics, but never before had there been two monolithic, incompatible choices before them: Iroquois religion or Christianity, right or wrong, and later, patriot or loyalist.

The Catholics were arguably the most influential Christian sect in Iroquoia since they initially paved the way for the Christianization of the Iroquois. They were not the first, however, and they were not the last. By the 1700s, Jesuit effectiveness had diminished considerably. Ironically, the next successful sect in Iroquoia was the Anglicans<sup>22</sup>.

Not unlike the events in England 200 years prior, the Anglicans usurped the well-established Catholic position in the Iroquois Confederacy. By 1700, many Iroquois still wished to embrace or practice Christianity, but the Jesuits had worn out their welcome.

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<sup>21</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 107

<sup>22</sup> Fenton, 9

Both political strife and disillusionment with the empty promises of the Jesuits caused the Iroquois to embrace the promise of Protestantism – more specifically, Anglicanism<sup>23</sup>.

The Anglicans did not simply replace the French Jesuits, but rather, competed with them. In 1701, Yale University was founded, which ended up being a huge boon to the Anglicans, since Yale's primary purpose was to train Anglican ministers, many of whom became missionaries to the Iroquois<sup>24</sup>. With Northeastern territory slowly but surely becoming Anglican, the French Jesuits moved south and west and competed with the Anglicans for salvation as they traveled. The age-old French/English rivalry<sup>25</sup> had come to America, and Iroquoia had been chosen as the battleground. Fifty years later, their competition for souls would become a real war – the French and Indian War – and the Iroquois would be trapped in the middle of their power struggle.

By 1710, the Iroquois had decided that Anglicanism served their needs better than Catholicism, if only because England was, politically speaking, a more potent ally than France. Four Iroquois “kings” visited London and delivered a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury requesting an Anglican chapel and a fort<sup>26</sup>. As with the Jesuits, military power was a deciding force in spiritual alignment. Once the Anglicans proved that their political influence was greater than that of the French Jesuits, an acceptance of their religion quickly followed. Within half a century, the Iroquois would be so ingrained with the British that they would take up arms with them against the French Catholics on Iroquois land<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Fenton, 351-352

<sup>24</sup> Fenton, 355

<sup>25</sup> Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (Yale University Press, 1992) 1

<sup>26</sup> Laura M. Stevens, The Poor Indians: British Missionaries, Native Americans, and Colonial Sensibility (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 111-112

<sup>27</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 3-4

While the Iroquois may have accepted Anglicanism on religious grounds alone, it is highly unlikely. The English and French were already embroiled in a struggle over the rights to trade in Iroquois land and monopolize Iroquois people. The Iroquois were fully cognizant of this fact and tried to use it to their advantage. One Iroquois leader named Teganissorens remarked: “You [English and French] both tell us to be Christians; you both make us madd, wee know not what side to choose but I will speake no more of praying or Christianity... wee are come to this conclusion that those that sells their goods cheapest whether English or French of them will wee have a Minister<sup>28</sup>.” While Teganissorens may just have been a cynic, he was also in a position to speak for many other Iroquois. His message is not one of spiritual concern, bur rather, economic apprehension. Christianity represented not only a spiritual way of life for the Iroquois, but also an economic reality. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, much of their livelihood depended on trading with Europeans<sup>29</sup>. A sect that performed only religious services was only fulfilling half of their function, as far as the Iroquois were concerned.

Additionally, accounts of Anglican preachers in Iroquois are often less-than-inspiring. An Anglican minister named Thoroughgood Moore took up residence among the Iroquois in Albany in 1703. During his time among the Iroquois, he did not learn to speak the language, never adapted to Iroquois customs, and perhaps never even preached a sermon to the Iroquois<sup>30</sup>. Given that Moore came from the English Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, one can assume that his actions were indicative of many other Anglican ministers in the Iroquois Confederacy. Although many

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<sup>28</sup> Cecil Headlman, “America and West Indies: August 1701, 16-20” Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies 19 (1910): 415

<sup>29</sup> Fenton, 9

<sup>30</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 222

Iroquois no doubt embraced Anglicanism on religious grounds in later years, it is hard to believe that the Iroquois would prefer the culturally-insensitive Anglicans over the culturally-immersed Jesuits on spiritual grounds alone.

Once again, Christianity polarized the Iroquois and forced them to make a decision: the cultural respect of the Jesuits or the economic benefits of the Anglicans. The choice was not made on religious grounds alone, and the choice would embroil the Iroquois in a world war fifty years later – one which they were eager to fight alongside their British allies, who had made good on their promises of both economic and spiritual beneficence. For the first time in their history, the Iroquois Confederacy as an entire people turned their backs on a foreign ally and embraced another one. In light of this, perhaps the British should have foreseen that the Iroquois would not blindly follow them into the American Revolution as they had hoped.

From skepticism regarding the Dutch Reform to cautious acceptance of Catholicism to savvy economic intrigue by way of Anglicanism, the Iroquois Confederacy adapted themselves to Christianity many times over in-between 1642 and 1781. Christianity advanced and polarized Iroquois politics beyond anything the Confederacy had ever faced before, and by the eve of the American Revolution, it had set in motion a cataclysm for their long-standing democracy.

### **III. Democracy: White Men Can't Vote**

While many historians no doubt cite anyone from John Locke to James Madison as the most influential figure in the drafting of the United States Constitution, a school of thought exists that credits the Iroquois with this achievement. Historian Bruce Johansen

cites two other historians who believe that the Iroquois Constitution was integral not only in founding the United States, but later, the United Nations<sup>31</sup>.

The Iroquois Constitution bears a number of similarities to its United States counterpart, to be sure: it covers voter eligibility, individual rights, and the power to make war, among other things<sup>32</sup>. Unlike the United States Constitution, however, the Iroquois Constitution derives its power from traditional Iroquois religious authority.

The fact that the Iroquois accepted Christianity fairly readily, split along European ideological lines, and possessed a constitution very much like that of their white neighbors are all interrelated. The Iroquois possessed, as a people, a mentality of individuals with God-given rights and a government that was accountable to its people. If the voice of the Iroquois people is indeed enshrined in its constitution, the reasons behind their Europeanization and subsequent disbandment become remarkably clear.

In the section of the Iroquois Constitution entitled “Rights, Duties, and Qualifications of Lords,” the freethinking, non-dogmatic mentality of the Iroquois becomes apparent: “If at any time it shall be manifest that a Confederate Lord has not in mind the welfare of the people or disobeys the rules of this Great Law, the men or women of the Confederacy, or both jointly, shall come to the Council and upbraid the erring Lord through his War Chief... The women will then select another of their sons as a candidate and the Lords shall elect him<sup>33</sup>.” A mere four paragraphs into a section that spans many pages, the constitution gives specific instructions for deposing an unjust or unlawful leader.

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<sup>31</sup> Bruce Johansen Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois, and the Rationale for the American Revolution (Gambit Incorporated, 1982) 15, 17

<sup>32</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation

<sup>33</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation

If the Iroquois wanted to depose a Lord and had the support of their War Chief, the process was surprisingly simple: “When a Lord is to be deposed, his War Chief shall address him as follows: ‘So you, \_\_\_\_\_, disregard and set at naught the warnings of your women relatives... I depose you of your title and remove the sacred emblem of your Lordship title. I remove from your brow the deer's antlers, which was the emblem of your position and token of your nobility. I now depose you and return the antlers to the women whose heritage they are<sup>34</sup>.’” Only a simple speech and a ceremonial repossession of antlers were necessary to depose a Lord. In practice, this was almost certainly much more difficult than the constitution suggests, but the underlying mechanism suggests a people – both men and women, interestingly – who do not tolerate arbitrary, self-serving, or immoral leadership. Furthermore, it suggests a people who may very well be suspicious of their government. Positions of power are tenuous, and if misused, will be stripped away with only a small ceremony.

Operating under the assumption that the constitution of the Iroquois reflected their general outlook (as many modern Americans believe that the U.S. Constitution reflects theirs), this idea helps explain the Iroquois hesitancy towards the Dutch Reformed and their largely unanimous and unemotional switch from French Catholicism to Anglicanism. When the Iroquois splintered over whether to help their British or American allies (or, alternatively, let the white men fight a white men’s war), they were able to do so because their constitution had instilled in them a belief in the rightness of their own beliefs, and of the arbitrary nature of power. Iroquois joined either the patriots or the loyalists out of a personal belief or stake in the cause, not because they were cajoled by any earthly ruler.

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<sup>34</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation

One question still remains, though: why did the Iroquois embrace Christianity in the first place, especially when many other Indian tribes did not? As suggested earlier, the inherent similarities between the Iroquois religion and Christianity played an important role. However, the Iroquois constitution contains a number of explicit references to one all-powerful Creator, and given how seriously the Iroquois took their democracy, any religious allusion made in the constitution would be given careful consideration.

The Iroquois Lords are charged with the following duties:

“It shall be the duty of all of the Five Nations Confederate Lords, from time to time as occasion demands, to act as mentors and spiritual guides of their people and remind them of their Creator's will and words. They shall say:

‘Hearken, that peace may continue unto future days!  
Always listen to the words of the Great Creator, for he has spoken.  
United people, let not evil find lodging in your minds.  
For the Great Creator has spoken and the cause of Peace shall not become old.  
The cause of peace shall not die if you remember the Great Creator.’

Every Confederate Lord shall speak words such as these to promote peace<sup>35</sup>.”

Unlike elected officials in the U.S. Constitution, the Iroquois leaders are charged with the responsibility of being religious mentors as well. Furthermore, while the majority of the Iroquois cosmology is not referenced in the constitution, the Great Creator makes a number of appearances, such as this one. Although the Iroquois were not monotheists in the strictest sense, the Great Creator was at the center of their religious beliefs, and one of the only religious forces worthy of mention in a document upholding their government<sup>36</sup>. The Iroquois are bound by their democratic laws to “always listen” to the Great Creator, for only he can dispel evil and bring about peace. When the Christian

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<sup>35</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation Circa

<sup>36</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation Circa

missionaries came with a monotheistic religion in tow, many Iroquois probably already recognized the Judeo-Christian God as the Great Creator.

If the two deities were one and the same, the Iroquois' gradual and largely sincere acceptance of Christianity was not only convenient; it was preordained by the foundation of their society. A reliable estimate is not available for how many Iroquois were Christians by time the Confederacy disbanded, but Richter estimates that over 20 percent of the Iroquois had been Christianized by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>37</sup>; 100 years later, their numbers had probably increased substantially. A confederacy of individualistic, democratic people embracing religions that support the idea of free will (Catholicism, then Anglicanism) could not possibly have remained undivided on an issue like the American Revolution, particularly when in many cases, their livelihood and land rights depended on it<sup>38</sup>.

One important idea to keep in mind is that the cultural flow between the Iroquois and the European settlers was not one-directional<sup>39</sup>. While imagining the European settlers as an unstoppable force that dominated every aspect of Indian life is easy, it is also not true. Historian Jerry Mander points out that in the time leading up to the American Revolution, would-be patriots barely had the numbers necessary to start a war against England, much less dominate the powerful Iroquois<sup>40</sup>. Since peaceful coexistence was more or less a necessity and the Iroquois in a given area often had greater populations than the whites, cultural exchange must have gone both ways. The Iroquois

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<sup>37</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 116

<sup>38</sup> Johansen, vii

<sup>39</sup> Jerry Mander, "Our founding mothers and fathers, the Iroquois," Earth Island Journal Fall 6.4 (1991): 30

<sup>40</sup> Mander, 30

taught white settlers about “agriculture, food, architecture, and urban planning<sup>41</sup>” suitable to the New World; that they would teach the whites about a suitable government as well is not so hard to believe.

In fact, even as Anglicans in league with the British, some Iroquois began having ideas of their own about American independence. Before he was a revolutionary statesman, Benjamin Franklin met with a group of Iroquois chiefs and colonial governors in 1744. The Iroquois recommended that the Americans rebel, a full thirty-two years before Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence<sup>42</sup>!

Historian Donald Grinde Jr. wrote an entire book on how the Iroquois were fundamental to the American Revolution. Not only did they fight alongside the patriots in many cases, but they actually gave the patriots – actively or through cultural diffusion – the foundation for a democratic government and the will to fight against the British for independence<sup>43</sup>. Benjamin Franklin in particular was very receptive to the government of the Iroquois. In 1751, he addressed colonial leaders saying:

“It would be a strange thing... if Six Nations of Ignorant savages should be capable of forming such a union and be able to execute it in such a manner that it has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble, and yet that a like union should be impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous<sup>44</sup>.”

Whether Franklin was being bigoted or using his trademark rhetorical irony here is not important. His sentiments convey, to modern ears, a strange idea. The American colonies were treated unfairly by the British, but this alone was not enough reason to rebel and form a new government. Rather, the Iroquois, an indigenous American people, had already developed a stable, democratic government; should the European-Americans

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<sup>41</sup> Mander, 30

<sup>42</sup> Mander, 30

<sup>43</sup> Donald Grinde Jr., The Iroquois and the Founding of an American Nation (Indian History Press, 1977)

<sup>44</sup> Albert H. Smyth, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin Volume 3 (MacMillan, 1905-07) 42

not do the same? If a race of “ignorant savages” granted themselves more liberty than the English granted their colonists, then perhaps it was better to imitate the Iroquois than the English.

Upon close inspection, the Iroquois (nothing if not clever diplomats) did not passively wait for the political tide to favor them. As they had rejected the Jesuits in favor of the Anglicans, they began to reject the English when it appeared that the colonists would be more potent economic and military allies. Not only did they support the spirit of rebellion; they actually drove the colonists to revolution. The Iroquois are responsible for starting the American Revolution at least as much as disgruntled colonial merchants and farmers.

The question is: why? The Iroquois were no stranger to political alliances, especially since their transition from French to English spiritual and economic alliances. That they should lose favor with the British and take up arms with the colonists seems like a natural progression. When the Iroquois welcomed the English to replace the French clergy, though, the economic advantage was clear. Siding with an alliance of farmers, craftsmen, and importers instead of the most powerful empire in the world requires a reason beyond economics – and in this case, beyond spirituality as well, since the Iroquois remained largely Anglican.

One possible answer smacks of both traditional Iroquois society and the effects of Europeanization. The democratic constitution and government of the Iroquois predate the European missionaries by hundreds of years, but the idea of proselytism arrived with the Europeans. Since the adoption of the constitution and the founding of the Confederacy, the allies of any Iroquois tribe were always part of the Five (or later Six) Nations, and

abided by the same rules. The idea that an ally's beliefs needed to be changed was foreign to them.

The European missionaries changed that conception. While there was some outright hostility between the Iroquois and missionaries – particularly Jesuits – early on<sup>45</sup>, the Iroquois and the European missionaries were fundamentally allies. Unlike the tribes of the Five Nations, however, the Europeans were not bound by the Iroquois Constitution. They had their own ideas and, through promises of spiritual fulfillment, passed these ideas on to the Iroquois very successfully.

The fact that the Iroquois, as a whole, were receptive to Christianity is pivotal to the idea that the Iroquois sparked the American Revolution. Because the Iroquois found Christianity spiritually fulfilling (and economically advantageous), they may have adopted, in some form, the idea of proselytism. Instead of trying to spread their religion to their allies, they tried to spread their form of government. When Benjamin Franklin met with the Iroquois in 1744, one chief named Canassateego addressed him:

“Our wise forefathers established Union and Amity between the Five Nations. This has made us formidable; this has given us great Weight and Authority with our neighboring Nations. We are a powerful Confederacy; and by your observing the same methods, our wise forefathers have taken, you will acquire such Strength and power. Therefore whatever befalls you, never fall out with one another<sup>46</sup>.”

In what seems like a reversal from a traditional white man's view of American history, here is a clear example of an Indian leader suggesting a form of government to European-Americans. By adopting the Iroquois Constitution (or, more generally, founding an independent, democratic society), the colonies would ensure “Union,” “Amity,” “Weight,” “Authority,” and “Strength.” Furthermore, if the colonies relied on

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<sup>45</sup> Shea

<sup>46</sup> Joseph E. Johnson, “Indian Treaties Printed by Benjamin Franklin, 1736-1762” The American Historical Review 45.1 (1939): 163

each other instead of England, they would become a powerful nation, just as the Iroquois had.

If their constitution and their mindset indeed made the Iroquois predisposed to Christianity, one thing remains to be proven: that Christianity was a central influence in the disbanding of the Confederacy. Among the Iroquois, the main split occurred in the Oneida nation. While most other Iroquois remained loyal to the British, the Oneida largely sided with the colonists<sup>47</sup>.

Historian David Levinson makes a strong argument for the Oneida alliance with the colonists signaling the end of the confederacy: “First, the alliance signified, and, in part, precipitated the collapse of Iroquoian political and military power... Second, because of their allegiance to the Colonists the Oneida suffered greatly, and were never again able to achieve the degree of prosperity and independence they enjoyed before the war<sup>48</sup>.” The Five (or Six) Nations of the Iroquois were not equally strong or numerous, but each one played an integral role in maintaining the Confederacy. If a major ideological split occurred, it only stands to reason that the Confederacy would be unable to fully recover.

By 1777, the Revolutionary War was underway, and the Iroquois Confederacy was already broken. When the Iroquois leaders convened for one last time at Onondaga Castle in the winter of that year, the council fire was extinguished, effectively nullifying the Iroquois Constitution, which states: “The Smoke of the Confederate Council Fire shall ever ascend and pierce the sky so that other nations who may be allies may see the

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<sup>47</sup> David Levinson, “An Explanation for the Oneida-Colonist Alliance in the American Revolution,” *Ethnography* 23.3 (1976) 265

<sup>48</sup> Levinson, 265

Council Fire of the Great Peace<sup>49</sup>.” The exact circumstances of the meeting are murky, but whatever the exact proceedings, the Oneida and the Tuscarora, unlike most Iroquois, refused to side with the British<sup>50</sup>.

After the war, the Iroquois nations, particularly the Oneida, were in an abysmal position. Drunkenness, food shortages, and squalor were not uncommon, especially since the Oneida allowed thousands of other displaced Indians to live on their land<sup>51</sup>. Levinson states: “Although the warring nations reconciled after the war, the Iroquois Confederation, abandoned by the British and not recognized by the Americans, was shattered<sup>52</sup>.” Even after receiving the aid of the Iroquois in the struggle for independence, the European-Americans were quick to forget their debts to the Indians and did nothing to help their long-standing Confederacy. As one nation was born, another one was dying, and the unhelpful policies regarding Indians of the new government would only exacerbate the situation.

Was Christianity really the underlying cause of this catastrophe? Using the Oneida as a case study, all signs point to it. The Oneida were among the Easternmost of the Iroquois, and some of the first to come in contact with Christianity and the Europeanization it brought. The fundamental compatibility of Christianity and the Iroquois religious and political beliefs paved the way for Europeanization, and in a few generations, rendered the Iroquois dependent on European trade; as previously discussed, spiritual and economic concerns for the Iroquois became one and the same, and by time the American Revolution occurred, separating Iroquois religion and politics is difficult, if

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<sup>49</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation

<sup>50</sup> Levinson, 272

<sup>51</sup> Levinson, 276

<sup>52</sup> Levinson, 276-277

not impossible. Finally, colonial missionaries like Samuel Kirkland influenced the Oneida to side with the patriots – if spiritual and economic concerns were inextricably linked, then spiritual leaders had to be considered economic leaders as well<sup>53</sup>.

When the dust of the Revolutionary War settled, many Iroquois were still alive, and willing to rebuild. But the machine set in motion by the Dutch Reformed almost 150 years earlier had irreversibly taken its toll. The Iroquois Confederacy was broken and soon, the Americans would leave them behind to pursue their Manifest Destiny all the way to the Pacific Coast.

#### **IV: Conclusion: Indian Nation**

Today, the Iroquois live on a small fraction of their ancestral homelands. A majority practice Christianity, but traditional Iroquois religion lives on both in its practitioners and in many adapted Christian customs<sup>54</sup>. They are American citizens.

While the Iroquois have decreased significantly in both number and influence over the course of the last 200 years, their culture still thrives<sup>55</sup>. Even so, the Confederacy as an autonomous form of government is long-dead, and, barring a population boom and a secession from the United States, will not rise again.

The irony of the story of the Iroquois is that in seeking spiritual enlightenment, they led themselves down a path of political chaos and schism; in their search for God, they found tragedy.

The Iroquois Constitution specified that decisions in an emergency must be “a confirmation of the voice of the people<sup>56</sup>.” The Iroquois did not will themselves towards

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<sup>53</sup> Levinson, 279

<sup>54</sup> Sullivan 137

<sup>55</sup> Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse 280

<sup>56</sup> Constitution of the Iroquois Nation

destruction, but rather, towards independent, democratic thought. Their history, whether viewed as a cautionary tale or a celebration of a free-market spirituality, is worthy of study and consideration.

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