Assimilation and Acculturation: A Comparison of the Evangelical Strategies of Russian Orthodox and Presbyterian Missionaries in Alaska

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Map

Description automatically generatedIn July 2022 I traveled to Sitka and Juneau, Alaska for three and a half weeks to do research for this essay. While in Sitka I spoke with Katherine Hope, a Tlingit woman, former head of the Sitka tribal government, and an Orthodox Christian. When I asked her how the Tlingit in Sitka remembered the period of attempted assimilation by the Presbyterians, she said that such times were not very present in cultural memory. She did, however, tell me that she felt that the Orthodox Church was different from the Presbyterian Church. In her view, the Orthodox Church did not attempt to forcibly assimilate or convert the Tlingit, rather, the Orthodox Church invited the Tlingit, and others, to learn and take part in the life of the Church.[[1]](#footnote-2) Due to their experiences in the American Southwest, and their direct association with the American colonial government, the Presbyterians pursued a policy of assimilation. That contrasts with the Russian Orthodox Church who, due to their isolation from the Russian state, pursued a policy of accommodation. I argue that the Presbyterians missionary’s unwillingness to waver in their efforts at assimilation as opposed to the Russian missionary’s willingness to accommodate Tlingit culture, resulted in many Tlingit choosing to adopt Russian Orthodoxy in 1886.

Figure 1: Map of Alaska with Native peoples and languages noted. Tlingit areas are colored brown.

The chronology of this essay focuses on the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century. At this time the population of the Tlingit in the Northwest Coast was in a state of flux due to war and exposure to European diseases such as smallpox. According to sources of the time, namely the ethnographic work *Die Tlinkit-Indianer* by Aurel Krause, the population of the Tlingit around the time of their initial contact with the Russians was about 8,000-10,000 people. The Tlingit population fell to around 6,000-6,700 by the 1880s due to years of conflict with the European powers and smallpox. [[2]](#footnote-3)

In this paper I begin with a brief overview of the main religious beliefs of the Tlingit, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Presbyterian Church, and some of the main intersections and divergences of each. Next, I provide a history of Russian Orthodox and Presbyterian missions, how they delt with native peoples, and how they came to Alaska. Finally, I examine and contrast the specific approaches the Russian Orthodox and Presbyterians used in Southeastern Alaska and the results of their missions.

General scholarly trends on Christian evangelization and assimilation in Alaska have shifted in recent years to emphasize the perspective of Native Alaskans. Initially scholars and independent researchers focused on missionaries and governments rather than Native Alaskans as autonomous actors. Researchers, such as Ted Hinkley in his book *The Americanization of Alaska*, which was published in 1972, primarily portrayed Native Alaskans as passive actors subject to the actions of the Americans, including Presbyterian missionaries and the government. Robert Geraci, in his book *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia,* argues that Russian Orthodox missionaries evangelized in Siberia to ensure political allegiance and cultural alignment with the Russians. Thus, in Geraci’s view, the Russian Orthodox missionaries and the state were inextricably linked with not only evangelization, but also assimilation. Lydia Black, in her book *Russians in America,* published in 2004, shifted toward emphasizing Native Alaskans’ agency in the conversion process, while maintaining focus on the work of Russian Orthodox missionaries and the Russian colonial government in Alaska. Black argued that Russian colonialism and evangelization in Alaska was a byproduct of their policies in Siberia; however, this differed from the Siberian missions in that the Russian Orthodox missionaries were far more conciliatory on issues of Native Alaskan cultural practices than previous missionaries had been in Siberia. Sergei Kan, in his book *Memory Eternal*, published in 1999, focused the scholarship on Native Alaskan agency in the conversion process. Kan argues that the Tlingit’s conversion to Orthodoxy in 1886 was an autochthonous movement. Taken together, these works provide a historical mosaic which effectively argues that the success and failures of the Orthodox and Presbyterian missions in Alaska can be traced to their ideological foundations. The later works in Alaskan colonization and missionary activity recognize and incorporate Kan’s view of Tlingit conversion to Orthodoxy as being driven by indigenous communities rather than missionary activity. This has also been the case in the study of Native American Christianity in general as seen with scholars such as Michelene Pesantubbee. Pesantubbee shifted scholarship from a view of Christianity as being entirely destructive to Native American culture, to showing how Native Americans used Christianity to protect their cultural practices and agency.[[3]](#footnote-4)

My work will not seek to push against the scholarly consensus which recognizes that the acceptance of Christianity by Native Alaskans was largely an autochthonous movement, rather, my work will seek to add to the scholarship by analyzing the strategies and ideological evolution of Russian Orthodox and Presbyterian missionaries. My use of a comparative approach rather than a singular focus on one missionary group is beneficial. That is because the period from the 1860s to the turn of the century saw two schools of missionary work, acculturation and assimilation, clash in Alaska. Comparing these two schools rather than isolating them allows for a more well-rounded view which puts these distinct approaches in conversation with each other. I will do this while recognizing that conversions to Russian Orthodoxy and Presbyterianism were autochthonous in nature, as established by Kan. The key point of divergence from previous scholarship will be a matter of focus. Where Hinckley largely ignored the issue of Native Alaskan autonomy in the conversion process to focus on the Presbyterian missions, my study will incorporate the more recent scholarship done by Black, Geraci, and Kan. This is to provide a critical examination of the evolution of missionary ideologies and the broader implications of those shifts in the study of missionaries and evangelization in general.

**Religious Context: Tlingit Religion, Russian Orthodoxy, and Presbyterianism**

Before discussing the missionary strategies of the Russian Orthodox and Presbyterian churches, it is necessary to give proper context and explanations on the major beliefs and outlooks of the main actors in American Alaska. This necessitates a brief discussion of the general beliefs and practices of the Tlingit, Russian Orthodox, and Presbyterians during the period of discussion.

The Tlingit people’s religious beliefs do not center around an omnipotent Creator God as is the case in Russian Orthodoxy and Presbyterianism. Rather, spirits called the Kinaa Yeigi function as helpers or guardians of individual people, somewhat analogous to a guardian angel. Also, spirits known as Shageinyaa serve as guardians for whole families, clans, and even the entirety of the Tlingit people, which is analogous, in some cases, to the Christian God.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Central to Tlingit religious, cultural, and political life was the ceremony known as the Potlatch. The Potlatch was practiced by many different peoples of the Northwest Coast area of the United States and Canada.[[5]](#footnote-6) The Potlatch lasted at least four days and could be held for significant events in the life of an individual or clan, including the beginning of warfare, end of warfare, forging of alliances, and death of a clan elder.[[6]](#footnote-7) The memorial potlatch, known as the Koo.eex, takes place one year after the death of a prominent clan member whereby members of a different clan from the opposite moiety are invited to the Potlatch.

The basic structure of a Koo.eex is as follows; a communal meal is held while guests are seated, and hosts are standing. Both guests and hosts bring gifts of food, material objects, and regalia called at.óow which are set aside for later distribution. Throughout the ceremony guests are expected to gift the hosts food and material goods as a show of familial support.[[7]](#footnote-8) The ceremony begins with the survivor of the deceased being given the robe or blanket of the deceased, to both literally show and figuratively symbolize their inheritance. Next, the hosts greet the guests and then sing mourning songs; the guests respond by singing songs to console the mourning clan.[[8]](#footnote-9) Following the donning of the at.óow and the singing of songs, the hosts distribute food, gifts, and thanks to their guests during which numerous dances are conducted by both the hosts and guests.[[9]](#footnote-10) Finally the ceremony concludes with the hosts distributing money to the guests. This money is collected throughout the ceremony. Additionally, the clan elders legitimize adoptions, the inheritance of names, and oversee the introduction of new at.óow.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Tlingit and other northwestern peoples’ religious beliefs primarily governed how one should interact with their surroundings and environment with emphasis placed on respect. Every living thing was seen as having a soul and being essentially human below the skin of the animal.[[11]](#footnote-12) An example of this is the story of Shanyaak'utlaax̲ or Salmon Boy, who disrespected the Salmon by throwing away a piece of salmon. The boy was saved by the Salmon People and lived with them where he learned that they were people just like he and his family were. When the boy returned, he taught his family the way of the Salmon and, most importantly, that the Tlingit needed to show respect for the Salmon who willingly gave themselves up so that the Tlingit could eat. This story is common among the many indigenous peoples of the Northwest coast of Canada and the United States.[[12]](#footnote-13)

The Tlingit understanding of death and the cycle of life is based on reincarnation. They believed when one dies only one’s physical body dies, while one’s spirit continues to live on. It is necessary to have an intact body which can be cremated whereupon the spirit within the body is released. Once the spirit is released, it can be reincarnated within their same clan and gender.[[13]](#footnote-14)

No central priesthood or clerical orders exist within the Tlingit religion. However, Shamans, who controlled spirits known as Yeigi, existed as the primary religious functionaries in Tlingit society. In addition, mediating between the physical and spiritual world, Shamans also healed the sick and fought against witches, who are believed to be the main source of spiritual and physical ills. Because they were pillars of their communities and enforcers of the moral order through the Yeigi, Shamans were expected to lead ascetic lives in addition to maintaining their spiritual obligations.[[14]](#footnote-15) The power of the Shamans gradually faded beginning in the 1830s as they were unable to provide cures for new European diseases and because colonial powers in Alaska actively persecuted them.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Eastern Orthodoxy was introduced to Southeast Alaska as early as 1788 but only became somewhat widespread among the Tlingit in the 1830s following the arrival of Ivanov Veniaminov and the beginning of his mission. Eastern Orthodoxy as practiced in Alaska from 1866 to 1917 was known as Russian Orthodoxy. Indeed, at that time the denomination was generally composed of, and governed by, ethnic Russians. The Russian Orthodox Church was, and remains, a self-governing, independent Church in the broader communion of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church consists of multiple churches such as the Church of Greece, Ukraine, Syria, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and many others. The multi-national character of the Eastern Orthodox communion meant that the Church was more willing to incorporate native languages and certain aspects of native cultures into church life.

To many Orthodox Christians, the central aspect of the faith is known as Theosis or deification. Theosis is the process by which an Orthodox Christian practices prayer, fasting, the giving of alms, and ascetic living to become more like Christ. This view comes from 2 Peter Chapter 1 verses 3 and 4:

As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which we have bene given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.[[16]](#footnote-17)

This idea is present in the writings of the prominent North American saint and missionary to the Tlingit, Ivanov Veniaminov (1797-1879) in his book the *Indication Of The Pathway Into The Kingdom Of Heaven* (1833). This is somewhat analogous with the Tlingit view of ethics and the lack of separation between the physical world and the spiritual world. In both cases, their religious beliefs shape their daily lives and inform how they act and interact with the world around them.

Furthermore, like Presbyterianism, the Russian Orthodox Church upholds the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection of the dead, and the afterlife. Unlike Presbyterianism, Russian Orthodoxy has a priesthood and clerical offices including deacons, priests, and bishops. Though not entirely analogous to the Shaman, Russian Orthodoxy has monks who are either clerics or laymen who have decided to lead ascetic lives dedicated to prayer for the spiritual health of themselves and their broader communities. Thus, the monks occupied a similar social niche to the Shamans.

Both icons and saints play an important part in Orthodox worship and memorialization for the revered dead, which is not present in Presbyterianism. Orthodox icons are images of either Christ or people who have been revered enough to become canonized as saints. When an Orthodox Christian enters a church, it is custom to kiss whatever icon is present in the sanctuary after crossing themselves three times. In an Orthodox home it is custom to have a corner which has no decoration aside from whatever icons are present, usually an icon of Christ, Mary, and whoever the patron saint of the person is. Icons have a role like clan regalia among the Tlingit, given they are objects which are considered especially sacred, though are not worshipped, and play an integral role in spiritual life.

The Presbyterian Church was brought to Alaska in 1867 with the arrival of soldiers and immigrants from the continental United States. The Presbyterian Church in America was officially founded in 1789 following the independence of the United States, though Presbyterian churches existed in the United States as early as 1640.[[17]](#footnote-18) The Presbyterian Church was initially composed mainly of Scottish and Scots Irish[[18]](#footnote-19) immigrants to the United States. These immigrants were part of the Church of Scotland which was founded in 1560.

The central article of faith for the Presbyterian Church in America, like many other Christian creeds, states that Presbyterians believe in the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the infallibility of scripture, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and in eternal life. Presbyterians differ from many other Christian denominations, even from other Protestants, in that they firmly believe in predestination. Presbyterians believe that before the creation of the world, God chose some of humanity to go to Heaven, and some to go to Hell when they die. This has been a consistent belief of the Presbyterian Church in America since the creation of the Church.[[19]](#footnote-20) Unlike Orthodoxy, Presbyterianism does not have an ordained priesthood, nor does it have monastic institutions. The Presbyterian Church in the United States employs ordained ministers as its main religious officiants.

**Orthodox Missionary Ideologies**

Russian Orthodox success in their Alaskan missions hinged upon the willingness of their clergy to accommodate native lifeways and cultural practices recognizing that the use of direct coercive power would not yield conversions. Russian Orthodox missionaries were present in Alaska since the establishment of the first Russian settlement in Unalaska in 1784. Orthodoxy came to Alaska because of the Russian Empire’s political and military expansion eastward into Siberia. As part of its project of colonization, the Russian government promoted the conversion of non-Orthodox and non-Christian peoples to facilitate positive relations.[[20]](#footnote-21) These conversions had to be validated by a priest through anointing with oil, however, baptism could and often was performed without the presence of a priest in Russian frontier towns.[[21]](#footnote-22)

Russian Orthodox missions typically saw success in convincing Native Alaskans to convert. This was especially true in Western Alaska where the clergy acted as advocates for the indigenous population who faced physical abuse at the hands of the Russian colonists. The monk priest Makarii wrote a report in 1797 on the abuses faced by himself and the Aleuts to the council of bishops who administered the entirety of the Russian Orthodox Church.

They [Russian colonists] exhibit no humanity whatsoever. They forcibly take women and children as concubines. They beat people to death. Beginning in early spring they send both the healthy and sick to hunt sea otters against their will.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Makarii is unambiguous in his condemnation of the Russian traders’ physical treatment of the Aleuts. His statement that the Russian colonists “exhibit no humanity whatsoever” is indicative of a major shift in the ideologies of Russian Orthodox missionaries. Prior to their arrival in Alaska, many of the Orthodox missionaries in Siberia regarded the Siberian natives as being racially inferior to the Russians. By stating that the Russians were behaving in a way beyond the scope of acceptable human action, Makarii is directly challenging the dominant views of the Russian Orthodox Church at that time. Indeed, later in the letter he speaks of the consequences of the maltreatment faced by the Native Alaskans. He notes that “Because of the humul[i]ation of being beaten, they commit suicide.” [[23]](#footnote-24) This shows a greater commitment to not just the physical but also the emotional and psychological health of the Native Alaskans. These views amounted to the idea that Native Siberians and Alaskans were racially inferior to ethnic Russians and only by the process of evangelization could the Native Siberians and Alaskans be made to be like Russians.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Makarii’s attention to the forced impressment of Aleutian natives into working for the Russian colonial merchants is indicative of a growing schism between the religious and economic sides of the colonial project. As priests like Makarii became more integrated with the new converts, the priests gradually had to acknowledge that if they were to care for their flock, they must go against the economic wishes of the state at some point. This put priests like Makarii in an especially tense position. Russian merchants relied heavily on the natives to do their hunting and trapping for them because many skilled Russian and Ukrainian hunters were tied to the lands west of the Urals in serfdom and thus could not aid in the colonization efforts.[[25]](#footnote-26) Thus, Makarii and any priest who aided Native Alaskans put themselves at odds with the main coercive force in Russian America, undercutting their profits by demanding humane treatment for Native Alaskans.

Clergy acting as intercessors for the Southeastern Alaskan Natives was relatively rare prior to 1867. According to German ethnologists who published the findings of their research in 1885, the settlement of Sitka had been without any clergy until 1816.[[26]](#footnote-27) That was seventeen years since its first founding in 1799 and twelve years since its re-construction in 1804 after it was destroyed by the Tlingit in 1802. Aside from the few Tlingit who were baptized by Russian Orthodox laymen to secure alliances, and the Tlingit chiefs who were present at the ceremony for the establishment of the Sitka colony, which had a series of prayers sung in Russian, very few Tlingit knew much about Orthodoxy until the arrival of the priest Ivan Veniaminov (1797-1871).[[27]](#footnote-28)

Ivan Veniaminov was a Russian Orthodox missionary who spent much of his life in Western Alaska and a portion of his career in Sitka with the Tlingit. He traveled to Alaska from Irkutsk, Russia, the main center for missions to Siberia and Alaska, in 1824. He lived in Western Alaska from 1824 until his transfer to Sitka in 1834.[[28]](#footnote-29) Following his time in Alaska he was elevated to the office of Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, and the Aleutian Islands’[[29]](#footnote-30) therefore he was put in charge of all missions in Alaska. Eventually he was appointed to the office of Metropolitan of Moscow, the titular head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

While in Sitka he became the parish priest of the Orthodox Church in that area. Veniaminov’s approach to evangelism necessitated a complex, though understandable, set of instructions which emphasized commonalities between indigenous and Russian religious practices. This is evidenced by a set of instructions Veniaminov sent to a priest monk in 1853:

The order of instruction should be made to conform to that which Providence itself points out to us. The law of Moses was given earlier than the law of the Gospel; and even before the written law of Moses the unwritten natural law was known and the author of it-God Almighty, the Creator…[[30]](#footnote-31)

Veniaminov’s attention to “The law of Moses” and God himself being innately known to humanity reveal his main goals in evangelization. Rather than seeking to bring something new to the Native Alaskans, he instead seeks to reawaken what is innately within them. This is significant in that he makes no claim that Russians are an inherently greater people who have been given a civilizational burden, rather, they are simply another people who the Gospel has been revealed to, by other missionaries. Additionally, this relates back to the discussion of Theosis; salvation and knowledge of Orthodox Christianity is a process which takes time and cannot meaningfully take place at the end of a sword.

Veniaminov goes on to emphasize the commonalities between Native Alaskan religion and Russian Orthodoxy, stating:

When thy hearers shall have become convinced of the existence of God and the law, then (but not before)… Illustrate this [why one should obey the law] with a brief narrative of the Deluge[[31]](#footnote-32)- (the tradition of it, though confused, exists among savage races)…[[32]](#footnote-33)

Veniaminov’s statement provides us with meaningful insight into the view of Russian Orthodox missionaries at that time. Despite his chauvinistic references to the Native Alaskans as being part of the “savage races,” his instructions relating to the Deluge are noteworthy. That is because it signifies a desire to emphasize similarities between Russians and Native Alaskans, rather than calling for greater efforts at cultural assimilation. Similarly, other Russian Orthodox missionaries explained Orthodox doctrine from within the framework of Native Alaskan cultural practices.

In a letter from a Russian bishop regarding the religious beliefs of the Natives on Kodiak Island he stated, “These concepts and laws have sometimes a very different and sometimes a close similarity to the message preached in the Holy Scriptures”.[[33]](#footnote-34) The similarities between the two faiths described by the bishop included: a belief in life after death, a similar creation account, and a similar moral philosophy. The bishop argues that the similar moral values between the Russians and the Aleuts are evidence of a shared origin after the Deluge. His argument further demonstrates the shift in missionary ideologies which emphasize finding commonalities rather than forcing assimilation.

This portion of the letter is followed by an instruction that the priest should “Only now begin Evangelical instruction proper”. [[34]](#footnote-35) His care in stating that this must take place before any discussion of statutes of the Church is indicative of a greater shift in the priority and ideology of the missionaries. Where in Siberia most of the missionaries were sent to extract compliance and affiliation with the Tsar[[35]](#footnote-36), the missionaries were now more dedicated to their spiritual duties rather than their secular ones.

Even following the teaching of the doctrines of the Church, Veniaminov insists that conversion be presented as a choice:

After this [instruction on Christian tenants] (on no account before), thou mayest make them an offer, and ask them whether they should like to join those who believe in Jesus Christ and hope to obtain through Him eternal salvation…[[36]](#footnote-37)

Veniaminov’s framing of the process as merely opening the door to the conversion of Native Alaskans is again indicative of the shift in the ideology and purpose of Orthodox Missionaries. Throughout Russia during its eastward expansion, many Russian clergy used their affiliation with the state to forcibly isolate and convert Muslims, Native Siberians, and other Christians (non-conforming Russian Christians, Eastern Rite Catholics, and Protestants) to Russian Orthodoxy.[[37]](#footnote-38) The presentation of the evangelization as a choice combined with the emphasizing of commonalities situated the missionaries less as a coercive institution and more as a solely religious one.

Veniaminov also speaks directly on eliminating the use of coercion in the conversion process; he states:

Thou shalt on no account attempt increase the number of those who are to receive holy baptism by any measures or means inconsistent with the evangelical spirit and unbecoming a preachers,- such as compulsion, threats, bribes, or promises…[[38]](#footnote-39)

Veniaminov’s strong condemnation of the coercive behaviors he described and his desire for a well thought out catechism indicates that he desired a shift away from the coercive nature of the missions in Siberia. This shift left the option for Native Alaskans to reject Orthodoxy if they so desired. His phrasing of the process, as a conversation where the priest explains what his beliefs are, followed by an invitation to join/convert puts the priest on somewhat equal footing with his potential congregation. While the priest would have a societal leg up with education and social mobility, his position as a missionary is not meant to be a coercive one. Veniaminov even said that Native peoples who did not wish to convert should not be treated poorly for their decision, stating: “Those who show no wish to receive holy baptism, even after repeated persuasion, should not in any way be vexed, nor, especially, coerced.”[[39]](#footnote-40)

In establishing how Russian missionaries were to deal with indigenous cultural and religious practice, Veniaminov again shifted the ideological narratives further toward placing spirituality above national identity:

Ancient customs, so long as they are not contrary to Christianity, need not be too abruptly broken up; but it should be explained to converts that they are merely tolerated… No matrimonial unions or contracts entered into before baptism must be considered hinderances to the administration of the Sacrament…[[40]](#footnote-41)

Veniaminov’s approach to native cultures and practices does still imply an eventual Russification, however, this view is still a departure from the purpose of Siberian missions. As previously mentioned, the missions in Siberia, which Veniaminov would have learned about during his time in Irkutsk, the main educational center for Siberian and Alaskan missionaries, emphasized securing loyalty to the Tsar above preaching. This often meant that nominal conversions were sought out rather than the long catechism process proscribed by Veniaminov. In stating that indigenous customs ought to be tolerated but not endorsed, Veniaminov is shifting the importance of missions to be less about affiliation and more about doctrinal Orthodoxy while still allowing for accommodations. This is particularly evident in his statements on marriage. One of the major goals of the missions to Siberia was to Russify and integrate the Native Siberian nobility into Russian life through marriage.[[41]](#footnote-42) In his toleration of native marriage customs and preexisting contracts, which included polygamy and marriages to maintain local alliances, he helps preserve indigenous social structures and avoids affiliating Christianity with noble privilege. Additionally, his instruction that clergy themselves should not even inquire into the marriages provides a small but meaningful buffer against culturally chauvinistic ideas among A picture containing text, book

Description automatically generatedthe clergy.

Figure 2: Veniaminov as the Metropolitan of Moscow

Veniaminov also approached the issue of languages with a sort of liberalness which de-emphasized Russification in missions. He stated: “At first, while still ignorant of Natives’ language, thou shouldst employ an interpreter, to translate thy word for them.”[[42]](#footnote-43) His proscribed usage of translators hinges on the missionary’s temporary lack of understanding of the native languages. His use of the qualifier “at first” implies that it was expected the missionaries would eventually learn and preach in the native language rather than Russian. This advice likely came from his time in Western Alaska among the Aleuts where Veniaminov learned the Aleut language and worked with an Aleut noble to create a written form of the language using Cyrillic script.[[43]](#footnote-44) This effort extended to his ministry among the Tlingit, where he attempted to create and propagate a written form of the Tlingit language.

Veniaminov developed his views of missionary work from his own experiences as a missionary in Western and Southeastern Alaska. In his 1823 journal detailing his missionary work in Alaska, he records his efforts at teaching catechisms and attempting to learn Native Alaskan languages. [[44]](#footnote-45) Both instances mirror the sets of instructions he sent to the priest monk in 1853 after Veniaminov’s appointment to the position of Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, and the Aleutian Islands. Thus, Veniaminov’s theoretical writings from his set of instructions can be contrasted with other more in situ missionary reports.

Ultimately, Veniaminov failed in his effort to spread a written form of the Tlingit language due in large part to his relatively short time among the Tlingit.[[45]](#footnote-46) Even with the use of a translator, Veniaminov’s intent is that the priest should be understood. This sentiment contrasted greatly with other Christian missionaries and even other Russian Orthodox missionaries. Veniaminov also largely failed to convert the entirety of the Tlingit to Russian Orthodoxy. By 1860, 447 Tlingit converted and chose to be baptized into Russian Orthodoxy, out of the around 6,000 Tlingit in Alaska. However, this was an increase of about thirteen times the number of converted/baptized Orthodox Tlingit from 1839, which numbered around 22 individuals. Notably, among those who had converted from 1839 to 1860, there were two former Shamans.[[46]](#footnote-47)

**Presbyterian Missionary Ideologies**

Like Orthodox missionary ideologies, Presbyterian missionary ideologies developed because of their previous experiences with missionary work. Following the ratification of the Guadalupe Hidalgo treaty and America’s subsequent annexation of the Southwestern United States in 1848, many Presbyterian missionaries set up missions and schools among the Indigenous, Mormon, and Catholic peoples in that area. These schools sought primarily to convert and Americanize these peoples.[[47]](#footnote-48) Much like how missionary experiences in Alaska served as a crucible by which the discourse of missions shifted for the Russians, the experiences of Presbyterian missionaries in the Southwest solidified certain ideas for Presbyterian missions.

Presbyterian missionaries embraced the ideas of tying Americanization to Christianity in the context of American westward expansion. The Presbyterian Church became directly involved with the United States’ assimilation of Native Americans through the peace policy passed by President Ulysses Grant in 1869. This policy granted certain Christian churches authority over reservations and provided state funding for the conversion of Native Americans to Christianity. The United States accorded the Presbyterian Church guardianship over Puebloan reservations in Santa Fe in 1872. Under the direction of the Presbyterian missionaries, the United States sought to assimilate and integrate Puebloans through conversion to Christianity and education in boarding schools.[[48]](#footnote-49)

Even though assimilation and Americanization were integrated into Presbyterian missionary ideologies, the question of whether race was a determining factor for salvation was still up for debate. John C. Lowrie (1808-1900), a prominent member of the Board of Foreign Missions organization for the Presbyterian Church, sought to address the issue of race in evangelization in an article he wrote titled *Grace, Not Race, In Christian Missions*:

To reach correct views of Race as a factor in missions, we must keep in mind that a race is made up of individuals, and all its people are descended from fallen parentage, partake of a depraved nature, and tend only to what is evil—unless changed, renewed, and ennobled by divine power. [[49]](#footnote-50)

Lowrie’s view of race as being a collection of individuals fallen in nature aligns with the Calvinist belief in predestination as discussed earlier in this paper. His indication that the innate corruption present in all humanity can only be overcome through God is meant to say that race does not matter in terms of salvation, personal reformation does. His insistence that this is the correct view of race for missionaries combined with his stature within the Presbyterian Church’s missionary organization indicates that his views were likely widely held. Lowrie’s establishment that Native Americans were not predestined to be rejected on account of their race meant that missions could continue. The article, published in 1881, came a year before the secretary of the interior published a report which called for more missionaries to assimilate the peoples of the southwest.

In practice, the Presbyterian views of race and missions were far more complicated. During his time in the Southwest, Sheldon Jackson (1834-1909), a prominent Presbyterian missionary and later superintendent of education in Alaska, wrote that the Native people of the Southwest were dirty, superstitious, and drunken savages who were in that state due to their religious beliefs.[[50]](#footnote-51) These sentiments were used by missionaries and policy makers to encourage westward expansion. In the eyes of the missionaries, the result of this would be that the Southwestern peoples would achieve a sort of civilizational maturity through Christianity.[[51]](#footnote-52) Recalling the words of Lowrie, the Presbyterians wished to use state institutions, emboldened by what they saw as God’s will, as a means toward the Americanization of the Native Americans.

Following the implementation of Protestant denominations as the main administrators of Native American education, the United States established a set of laws to ban Native American religions. The United States passed the Code of Indian Offenses in 1883 which, among other things, banned many indigenous lifeways and religious practices. The bans specifically targeted the practices of ritualized dances, gift giving/destruction, polygamous marriage, and medicine men. Violation of these laws typically carried sentences of not more than a month in jail and/or having their allotted rations taken away from them.[[52]](#footnote-53) The reasons behind the bans varied, but most were based on the idea that these institutions were barriers to adopting American Christian civilization.[[53]](#footnote-54)

The actions of the various Protestant, including Presbyterian, missionaries in the Great Plains and Southwest translated to their actions in Southeastern Alaska. Sheldon Jackson made many comparisons between Native Alaskans and the natives of the Great Plains and Southwest. In his report on the 1887 visit of Nathaniel Dawson, the United States Commissioner of Education, Jackson quoted territorial governor A. P. Swineford:

They [Native Alaskans] are far superior intellectually, if not in physical development, to the Indians of the plains, are industrious, more or less skillful workers in woods and metals, and that they are shrewd, sharp traders…[[54]](#footnote-55)

Jackson’s decision to use this quote of Swineford in his report indicates multiple things. First, the quote indicates that Jackson directly related his and other missionaries’ experiences in the Great Plains and Southwest to his own work in Southeastern Alaska. Second, the description of the Native Alaskans as being intelligent and hardworking artisans and traders is not meant to indicate a genuine admiration for Native Alaskans. Rather, the quotation indicates that he saw Native Alaskans as being pre-disposed toward an American market economy. Third, the quote being from the governor is evidence that the Presbyterian missionaries and the territorial government were of one mind in their goal of assimilation.

**Presbyterian and Orthodox Missionaries’ Ideologies and Practices in Contrast (1866-1917)**

The Presbyterian missionary goal for the assimilation of Native Alaskans differed significantly from the practice of Russian Orthodox missionaries. An example of this is found in the writings of the Russian Orthodox Hieromonk, a monk priest, and a parish priest in Sitka, Anatolii Kamenskii (1863-1925). He believed that it was a mistake to divorce the Native Alaskans from their traditional lands and pressure them into adopting trades. He instead proposed that Native Alaskans be given ownership of the lands they inhabited and subsisted on through hunting and fishing. He also believed that the schools should not teach the Native Alaskans trades which would only serve them in the American economy, but instead teach them trades which were valuable in their own economy.[[55]](#footnote-56)

With the experiences of other Presbyterian missionaries and his own in mind, Sheldon Jackson set about creating a framework by which government institutions could be used for assimilation in Alaska. He began by pushing for the passage of Organic Act of 1884 which transitioned Alaska from a military to a civilian led government.[[56]](#footnote-57) The act also mandated the creation of a system of education for children of all races. Jackson was appointed the General Agent of Education in 1884 to ensure the creation and maintenance of such an educational infrastructure.[[57]](#footnote-58)

Jackson’s intent for the system of education was the same as his missionary work in the Southwest and Great Plains, to Americanize the native peoples and spread Christianity. Jackson elected to achieve this by separating children from their parents and preventing them from speaking their native languages. Shortly after his appointment as the General Agent of Education in Alaska in 1885, he was sued by a Tlingit woman for the custody of her child. For a time, the court ruled that Jackson and the boarding schools could not keep children confined within the schools.[[58]](#footnote-59) Eventually the ruling was overturned by Judge Lafayette Dawson (1839-1897) who was more sympathetic to Jackson and the other missionaries. In his ruling, the Judge argued:

It is quite obvious that to permit the parents of these children to place them in school under an agreement that they shall remain there for a determinate period, and the withdraw them at their own pleasure, would render all efforts of both the government and missions to civilize them abortive.[[59]](#footnote-60)

The ruling shows us that the government of Alaska and the Presbyterian mission schools both aimed to acculturate the Tlingit within the boarding schools. Jackson’s alignment with the government and their use of coercion through legal structures contrasts with the policies of Orthodox missionaries.

The Presbyterian missionaries’ approaches to education and evangelization differed from Russian Orthodox approaches in a few significant ways. The first way was the choice to affiliate with the State. While Russian Orthodox missionaries did seek to acculturate the Tlingit, they did not seek to use their influence as clerics of the state religion to do so. Veniaminov himself instructed the missionaries to avoid identifying themselves as agents of the state. He said that they should instead, “… appear in the guise of a poor wanderer… who has come for the single purpose of showing them the means to attain prosperity and, as far as possible, guiding them in their quest,”[[60]](#footnote-61) thus separating themselves, in the eyes of Alaskan Natives, from any connotations of the coercive power of the state. The Presbyterians instead chose to align themselves more directly with the state, to better “civilize” the Tlingit in the words of Judge Dawson.

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Description automatically generated The second way in which Presbyterian and Russian Orthodox educational strategies differed was in their perspectives on isolating Native Alaskans. As Judge Dawson acknowledged in his ruling, the Presbyterians saw any returning to old lifeways as a danger to assimilation. Therefore, any hope of Americanizing Tlingit and other Native Alaskan children relied on their continual isolation from their families. In contrast, Russian Orthodox missionaries were instructed to establish themselves within Native Alaskan communities. Veniaminov himself stated, “Thou art to take up thy residence more or less permanently where thou shalt judge they presence to be most needed and useful. Happy indeed is the preacher, whos presence among them the natives regard as a privilege,”[[61]](#footnote-62) for the purpose of instructing Native Alaskans in the doctrines of Russian Orthodoxy. This belief was also held by Kamenskii, who argued that educational reforms which situated the schools inside Native Alaskan villages, rather than outside them, were necessary.[[62]](#footnote-63)

Figure 3: Kamenskii with Orthodox Tlingit noblemen

The third way in which the Russian Orthodox and Presbyterian missionaries’ educational practices differed was in their approach to native languages. The essential difference between their respective approaches was that the Presbyterians saw education exclusively in English as necessary to the process of assimilation. In contrast, the Russians often used the Russian and Tlingit languages in both secular and religious education. This bilingual approach was especially common in liturgical contexts.

Presbyterian missionaries’ policy of isolating children from their families and culture also entailed isolation from their language. Jackson argued that any use of Native language in education, or even speaking in native languages, was a roadblock to their efforts at assimilation.[[63]](#footnote-64) This sentiment was shared by other Presbyterian missionaries such as Samuel Hall Young (1847-1927), a Presbyterian missionary in Southeastern Alaska and an ardent proponent of assimilationist policy. In his autobiography, Young wrote:

When I learned the inadequacy of these languages to express Christian thought, and when I realized that the whites were coming; that schools would come; that the task of making an English-speaking race of these natives was much easier than the task of making a civilized and Christian language out of the Thlingit…[[64]](#footnote-65)

Young’s statements align with the ideas put forth by Judge Dawson’s ruling and Lowrie’s ideas about race and missionary work. His belief that the Tlingit could not be assimilated unless they were forced to speak and learn English aligns with Dawson’s ruling in that they both saw any Tlingit cultural influence, particularly from language, as being detrimental to the assimilation process. Young’s views also align with those of Lowrie, particularly in the idea that native languages lacked the ability to express the ideas of Christianity. Young’s insistence that boarding schools would make the process of assimilation and evangelization easier aligns with Lowrie’s idea that Native Americans, writ large, could be incorporated into Christian civilization just as the Anglo-Saxons were.

The enforcement of these ideologies in Presbyterian schools was absolute and severe combining physical and psychological abuse to pressure the Tlingit into speaking English. These punishments included physical beatings, mouth washing with soap, the taping of children’s mouths, and being forced to stand in front of the classroom while wearing a dunce cap.[[65]](#footnote-66) The efforts of Jackson and Young to eliminate the Tlingit language failed; however, that was only due to conscious and sustained efforts by the Tlingit to keep their language. Women like Naa Tlaa, (English name Jessie Dalton), who continued to speak their language in boarding schools despite the threats of punishment, are to be credited for the survival of the Tlingit language.[[66]](#footnote-67)

The practice of monolingual education and severe punishments for speaking Native languages by Presbyterian missionaries presents perhaps the greatest contrast with the Russian Orthodox missionaries’ approach. As described earlier, Veniaminov proscribed the use of translators as a way of communicating with Native Alaskans prior to learning their language. He also indicated that missionaries were to learn “at least so much of their language as will enable thee to understand them,”[[67]](#footnote-68) while the assistant assigned to aid in missionary work was to study the languages more deeply.[[68]](#footnote-69) This instruction is within the context of instructing Native Alaskans in Russian Orthodox doctrines and practices.

As previously described, Veniaminov also encouraged and actively participated in the translation of the Bible and other Russian Orthodox religious texts from the Russian language into Native Alaskan languages. He wrote a catechism titled *Indication of the Way to the Kingdom of Heaven* in the Aleutian language with the help of Orthodox Aleut elders.[[69]](#footnote-70) Veniaminov’s policy of bilingual education yielded positive results, especially among the Aleutian people where some committed the lives of saints to memory and wrote them down in the Aleutian script that was partly devised by Veniaminov.[[70]](#footnote-71) This process extended to the Tlingit in the Southwest, even beyond the United States’ purchase of Alaska and into the 1900s.[[71]](#footnote-72)

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Description automatically generatedPresbyterian missionaries, and Sheldon Jackson in particular, held Tlingit cultural practices in contempt because they saw them as either sinful or obstructions to assimilation. Jackson held the practice of polygamy especially in low regard. In his book on Alaska missions, he stated that “Polygamy, with all its attendant evils, is common among many tribes. These wives are often sisters. Sometimes a man’s own mother or daughters is among his wives. [[72]](#footnote-73)“.

Figure 4: Sheldon Jackson

The passage is situated within a chapter titled *The Degradation of Indian Women in Alaska* which itself contains details on female infanticide, slavery, and geronticide. By framing polygamy alongside the other issues, Jackson is attempting to equate the practice of polygamy with violent subjugation of women to further his idea that the Tlingit and other Alaskan Natives need to be civilized. Reenforcing that idea, he asserted that the practice of incestuous polygamy was common, despite incest being a cultural taboo among the Tlingit, this calls back to Jackson’s condemnation of the Mormon practice of polygamy. Though Jackson gives no call for the instruction of missionaries on how to deal with polygamy, his alarmist tone combined with his previously expressed sentiments about polygamous Mormons implies that he did not wish to seek accommodation.

While the Tlingit did indeed practice polygamy, the practice was quite different from the one described by Jackson. It was not uncommon for Tlingit noblemen to marry sisters to prevent inter familial harmony from breaking down, these were sisters from a different family rather than his own. In some cases, Tlingit women had multiple husbands who were usually brothers, though this practice was somewhat rare.[[73]](#footnote-74) Tlingit women also held a fair amount of social capital within their marriages and broader society due to their key role in organizing and preparing for Potlatch feasts.[[74]](#footnote-75) The lack of continuity between the statements of Jackson and the reality of Tlingit practice implies a lack of desire to truly understand Tlingit cultural norms and underscores Jackson’s desire to do away with Tlingit cultural practices.

Jackson’s and Presbyterian views of polygamy contrast greatly with the views of Veniaminov and Russian Orthodox missionaries. Where Veniaminov recognized that polygamous practice was at odds with Orthodox teaching, he also saw that accommodation was necessary. By allowing converted families to join the Church and receive communion while maintaining their marital bonds, Veniaminov allowed people in such marriages to participate fully in the life of the Church. While the laws advanced by the various Protestant agents of the Bureau of Indian Affairs allowed for the polygamous marriages done prior to the passage of the Code of Indian Offenses to continue, the law mandated an immediate end to any future marriages.

It is worth noting that Anatolii Kamenskii, despite being more overtly in favor of assimilation, disputed Jacksons assertion. In his ethnographic work *Tlingit Indians of Alaska*, originally published in 1906 in Odessa, Ukraine, Kamenskii opens his section on Tlingit familial life by noting that the Tlingit held incest as a taboo and that women typically had a greater say in their choice of spouse. Kamenskii also notes that Tlingit women were respected in society and generally treated well.[[75]](#footnote-76) The research done by Kamenskii shows the Russian missionaries’ dedication to understanding the life and culture of the people they were evangelizing.

In addition to the contempt shown toward polygamous marriages, Presbyterian missionaries also expressed contempt for indigenous cultural institutions like the Potlatch. The Potlatch, as described earlier in this paper, is a ceremony which serves to mark special occasions in the life of an individual or tribe. These occasions include the death of a prominent person, the beginning and end of warfare, and the forging of alliances. Sheldon Jackson and the Presbyterian missionaries saw the Potlatch and other traditions primarily as an obstacle in their efforts at assimilation. In his book on the Alaskan missions, Jackson quotes an unnamed ethnologist who describes the mourning practices of the Tlingit thusly: “The mourners leaped and howled around the burning pyre like demons, holding long poles in their hands.”[[76]](#footnote-77) Jackson’s choice to quote an ethnologist who describes the mourning songs of the memorial Potlatch in this way indicates Jackson’s view of the Potlatch as a heathen ceremony. This description of the Potlatch as demonic also indicates that he saw the ceremony as something to be eradicated rather than tolerated.

Jackson spoke of the Potlatch directly as an obstacle to conversions in his relaying of a story about a Tlingit elder who converted to Presbyterianism. In his book on the Alaskan missions, Jackson portrays the Potlatch as a barrier to the Tlingit adopting Christianity. He then relays a story told to him by another missionary about a Tlingit chief, who after a spiritual journey decided to adopt Christianity. The chief said that he intended to seek conversion only after the next Potlatch occurred. However, the chief felt bad that he was delaying his conversion, so he accepted Christianity immediately rather than waiting for the next Potlatch, therefore adopting Christianity and abandoned his former culture.[[77]](#footnote-78)

Outside of religious concerns, Jackson and other Presbyterian missionaries saw the Potlatch and other ceremonies as being disruptions to the process of assimilation. This was because the schools had difficulty retaining the children during times where traditional native feasts, including the Potlatch, were practiced.[[78]](#footnote-79) This relates back to the ideas of Dawson’s ruling and Young and Jackson’s policy of isolating the Tlingit. Were the Tlingit children to participate in the festivals, they would have another connection to their culture and would not be assimilated as efficiently.

Jackson’s policies regarding the Potlatch directly contrast with the policies and practices as outlined by Veniaminov. As previously discussed, Veniaminov encouraged Russian Orthodox missionaries to accommodate native cultural practices rather than eliminate them. This accommodation was conditional; practices would only be tolerated if they did not run counter to the doctrines of Russian Orthodoxy, according to Veniaminov. Nonetheless, the policy of accommodation appears to have resulted in new and varied forms of the memorial Potlatch, with prayers at Russian Orthodox churches preceding the feast itself, in some cases.[[79]](#footnote-80)

Veniaminov’s policy was not always followed in its entirety. Kamenskii established a mutual aid society in Sitka in 1896 which was meant to alleviate poverty in the Tlingit community. Kamenskii mandated that to receive the aid the members had to stop participating in “… old pagan ceremonies and rituals… other pagan festivities… memorial feasts for the dead…”[[80]](#footnote-81). The separation of so-called pagan practices into three distinct categories may be a way of delineating between the different kinds of Potlatch. The most direct reference Kamenskii makes to the Potlatch is the prohibition of memorial feasts which likely is meant to signify the Koo.eex or the memorial Potlatch.

 Unlike Kamenskii, other priests held far more accommodating and even positive views of the Potlatch. An example of this is found in the Russian Priest Andrew Kasheveroff (1863-1940), a half Aleut and half Russian priest. Kashevaroff served as the head priest in Sitka from 1904 to 1910 and held a positive view of the Potlatch and other aspects of Tlingit culture. In an article regarding a presentation he gave at a girl’s school in 1924, Kashevaroff differentiated between the various kinds of Potlatch such as those for settling debts, commemorating the dead, and honoring ancestors. He stated that if Americans learned about the Potlatch from the Tlingit, then they would have no reason to be against the practice.[[81]](#footnote-82) This insistence on gaining an understanding of Tlingit culture from the Tlingit themselves also corresponds to instructions given by Veniaminov for missionaries to do all they could to learn about the culture of their parishioners.[[82]](#footnote-83)

Figure 5: Andrew Kashevaroff in Tlingit at.óow

**Conclusion**

Russian missionaries shifted after their ideologies after they arrived in Alaska. They realized they needed to be more accommodating of Native culture and lifeways if they hoped to be successful. This change is demonstrated best by the writings of Makarii, Veniaminov, and other Orthodox clergymen in Alaska. The Presbyterians solidified their ideologies and practices in Alaska to continue the emphasis put on assimilation which originated in the American Southwest and Great Plains. Evidence of that continuation is seen in the writings of Presbyterian missionaries and American government officials who experienced missionary and government work in the American West and Alaska. Indeed, by 1889 the majority of the Tlingit in Sitka, the main center of Russian Orthodox and American Presbyterian life, chose to be baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church.[[83]](#footnote-84) Putting these distinct approaches in contrast provides greater context to the decisions of the Tlingit regarding conversion. Recalling the sentiment of Katherine Hope, the main reason for why many Tlingit chose to convert to Russian Orthodoxy as opposed to Presbyterianism was because of the willingness of the Russians to accommodate the Tlingit. This also provides a needed refocusing on the missionaries, without sidelining Native Alaskans as a people who are acted upon.

As previously outlined, the general scholarly trends surrounding the religious histories of the Tlingit people have shifted to emphasize the autochthonous nature of many conversions. However, the discussion and contrast of the individual strategies used in evangelization have yet to be adequately explored. This is important not only for missiology, as such an examination provides scholars in that field with greater insight into the development of modern Christian missions, but also provides valuable information on processes of assimilation and evangelization historically. The study of colonial missiology is particularly necessary to gain a rounded perspective of colonial histories where religious missions factored heavily in colonization, such as in Algeria under French rule and East Africa under British rule. Understanding missionary strategies is essential to understand missionaries as agents of colonialism. The mechanics of colonialism, like evangelical missions, are fundamentally important because it is only through understanding them that one can acquire a full picture of the colonial project.

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    Figure 5: Alaska State Libraries, Andrew P. Kashevaroff wearing Chilkat blanket., Photograph, Alaska Digital Archives, https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg21/id/24268/rec/7, 6/3/2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
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