The Inupiat and the christianization of Arctic Alaska

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Résumé: Les Inupiat et la christianisation de l'Alaska arctique.

En 1890, quand les premières missions furent établies au nord du détroit de Béring, la région ne comptait aucun autochtone chrétien. En 1910, la pénétration du christianisme était à peu près totale. Les bases de cette transformation phénoménale avaient été établies entre 1897 et 1902, dans la région de Kotzebue Sound par Robert et Carrie Samms de l'Église des Amis ainsi que par un Inupiaq, du nom d'Uyaraq, converti précédemment par des missionnaires de l'Église Covenant située au sud de la région sur laquelle porte cet article. Le christianisme se propagea de Kotzebue vers l'intérieur, vers la côte arctique de l'Alaska et même vers le delta du Mackenzie au Canada. Cet article documente le cours de ces événements et propose une explication de leur raison d'être.

Abstract: The Inupiat and the christianization of Arctic Alaska.

In 1890, when the first missions were established in Alaska north of Bering Strait, not a single Native in the region was a Christian. By 1910 Christianity was nearly universal. The foundation for this dramatic development was laid in Kotzebue Sound between 1897 and 1902 by Robert and Carrie Samms, of the Friends Church, and by an Inupiaq Eskimo named Uyaraq, who had been converted earlier by Covenant missionaries located south of the study area. Christianity was spread from Kotzebue to the interior, to the Alaskan Arctic coast, and even to the Mackenzie Delta region of Canada, by the Natives themselves. In this paper I document the course of these developments and present an explanation of why they occurred as they did.

Introduction

In 1890 there probably was not a single Christian Inupiaq (sing.) Eskimo. Twenty years later, there was scarcely an Inupiaq who was not a Christian. The source of this transformation would appear self-evident to anyone aware of the following facts: 1) in 1887 the Mission Covenant of Sweden opened a station at Unalakleet, on Norton Sound; and 2) in 1890 missions were established by Congregationalists at Wales, Episcopalians at Point Hope, and Presbyterians at Barrow.
The situation was not as simple as these facts make it appear, however. After some early success, the Covenant missionaries became involved in the Nome gold rush, and, at least temporarily, lost much of their influence. One of the first two Congregationalist missionaries at Wales was assassinated by some Inupiaq youths; his colleague, who did preside over some conversions, was too distracted by teaching and reindeer management duties to devote much of his time to religious matters. The first Episcopal missionary at Point Hope ended up being converted by the Inupiat (pl.) into becoming a Native. Events at Barrow were less dramatic, but missionary work there was delayed by a number of practical problems and distractions; conversions there were slow in coming.

In this paper I present evidence to support the thesis that the initial conversion to Christianity of the overwhelming majority of Inupiat living north of Bering Strait happened in the following way. Between 1896 and 1902, Uyaraq ("Rock"), a Native who had been converted by the Covenant missionaries at Unalakleet, and Robert and Carrie Samms, Friends (Quaker) missionaries who established a mission at Kotzebue in 1897, developed a community of Inupiaq Christians around Kotzebue Sound. The members of that community then spread the new religion over the entire rest of the region. Most Inupiat, including those at Point Hope and Barrow, were converted by other Inupiat. Following the descriptive account, I present an explanation of why developments unfolded as they did.

The primary focus of this paper is the Inupiat Eskimos living in Alaska north of Bering Strait. Since developments in their region were partly connected to those south of Bering Strait, some attention must be paid to the latter. In addition, since developments in northern Alaska had a direct impact on the Natives living in the Mackenzie Delta region of Canada, some attention is paid to them as well. The specific time period of interest is 1890 to 1910, the era in which the initial conversions occurred. This limitation is important, because many significant changes in religious belief and practice have occurred in Arctic Alaska since that time.

Map 1

The introduction of Christianity in Northern Alaska

Christianity was first systematically introduced to Alaska Natives by Russian Orthodox priests in the late eighteenth century (Kahn 1988). For several decades they had the field to themselves, but restricted their activities to the southern and southwestern parts of the Territory of Alaska. Presbyterians became involved in Alaskan missionary work in the 1870s (Dimmit 1948a, 1948b), but only in southeastern Alaska. By 1880 several other Protestant denominations were preparing for the Alaska field. They joined with the Presbyterians in a comity agreement whereby the Territory was divided among them into spheres of influence (Almquist 1962: 126, Dimmit 1948b: 14, Flanders 1991: 47).

The first denomination to establish operations near the area of present interest was the Mission Covenant, a nonconformist church organized in Sweden in 1878 (Carlson 1967: 359 n. 24). The members of this church had been encouraged in this endeavor by Baron
N. A. E. Nordenskiold, who had passed through Bering Strait in 1879 at the end of his traverse of the Northeast Passage (Almquist 1962: 18, Nordenskiold 1882). The Mission Covenant was not party to the comity agreement, and its members probably did not know about it. Their first missionary, Axel Karlson, did not even have a destination in mind when he left California for Alaska. Instead, he depended on God to reveal it to him at the appropriate time. Conversations with the pioneer Episcopalian missionary John Chapman on board ship persuaded him to go north of the mouth of the Yukon River. When he disembarked at St. Michael, on the south side of Norton Sound, he met a Russian-speaking Native named Nashalook, who talked him into going on to Unalakleet (Almquist 1962: 19). Unalakleet was in an area left unassigned in the comity agreement, so Karlson’s choice of location was acceptable to the other churches.

In 1885 Sheldon Jackson, formerly a missionary in the western continental United States and southeast Alaska, was appointed General Agent of Education for Alaska (Lazell 1960, VanStone 1980: 175). Jackson (1893: 1260) epitomized the view, widespread at the time, that teachers and missionaries were charged with "the general uplifting of the whole [Native] population out of barbarism into civilization." Civilization meant, as a minimum, literacy (in English), cleanliness, industry and Christianity. As VanStone (1980: 177) put it, "true conversion meant nothing less than a virtually total transformation of native existence."

Given Jackson’s philosophy and missionary background, it was natural for him, as General Agent, to embark on a program of establishing government-sponsored schools staffed by missionaries. The immediate stimulus to extend this program to Arctic Alaska was provided by Lieut. Commander Charles H. Stockton, commander of a U. S. Navy cruise to northern Alaska in the summer and fall of 1889 (Stockton 1890; Stuck 1920: 28). Upon his return, he reported on the sad state of the Natives living there and encouraged both Jackson and the Episcopal Church to do something about it. Prodded by a new sense of urgency, Jackson advertised for volunteers in March, 1890. Less than three months later, he had them on a ship heading north (Ray 1975: 214).

**Early developments, ca. 1887-97**

By the fall of 1890 missions had been established at Barrow, Point Hope, and Wales, within the study area, and at Unalakleet a short distance to the south. Although the interest here is solely in the religious work, it must be kept in mind that each of these missions was also a school and a nursing station. Teaching, attending to the sick, and dealing with the many daily chores of northern life occupied a great deal of a missionary's time. The emphasis varied to some extent from one station to another.

**Norton Sound**
At Unalakleet things started badly in 1887 for the Covenants when some men threatened to kill the missionary, Axel Karlson. He was forced to live under Nashalook’s protection for three months before he could start building his own quarters (Almquist 1962: 19-21). However, he managed to visit several Native villages during the first winter, and, after a quick trip back to the United States for supplies and help, found himself in fairly comfortable circumstances in the fall of 1888. It was about this time that he saved the life of a teenage Inupiaq boy named Uyaraq ("Rock"), whose father had been murdered.4 Uyaraq, who soon learned English, became Karlson’s sled-driver and interpreter, and, apparently, his first convert (Roberts 1981: 96). Outside of Uyaraq, Karlson’s "message was not eagerly received at first, and he worked for several years before the first convert was won to Christ" (Almquist 1962: 21). However, by 1893 the Covenants had enough personnel in the field to establish a second mission school at Golovin, and, by the winter of 1895-96, were working with three Native assistants in addition to Uyaraq (Jackson 1897: 1449).

In 1898, the Covenant missionaries at Golovin "abandoned their posts and joined the mobs in their quest for wealth" on the golden beaches and rivers of Nome (Correll 1974: 307). Indeed some of them had played a major role in finding gold there in the first place (Carlson 1951, 1967). The rest of the non-Native Covenant staff resigned to join them in 1900 (Almquist 1962: 23). This caused considerable bitterness in Unalakleet, which took some years to resolve (Correll 1974: 308).

Map 2

Wales

The Congregational mission and school at Wales were opened in 1890 by William Thomas Lopp and Harrison Robertson Thornton. From the first, the then-bachelor missionaries were harassed by Natives, who regarded them as "too poor to trade, too stingy to marry, and too effeminate to hunt" (Lopp 1892: 390). Trouble was worst when the Natives were inebriated, as they often were. Shamans, of whom there were eight in the community at the time (Thornton 1931: 104), also fulminated against the missionaries from time to time. I have not been able to find any references to conversions (or the lack thereof) during the first few years of the mission, but the decisive event of this period was Thornton’s assassination, on August 19, 1893 (Montgomery 1963, Ray 1975: 219-220). This caused the school and mission to be closed for a year.5

Lopp, who had moved to Teller in 1893 to manage the reindeer station, returned to Wales in 1894 and reopened the mission. Frustrated by the lack of religious progress, he sent a letter to the Covenant missionaries, inviting them to visit Wales and help conduct a revival meeting. In March, 1895, David Johnson arrived from Unalakleet with two Native assistants. While they were there, "services were held in the school house day and night" (0). Within just a few weeks, "a sufficient number had made their peace with God" to enable Lopp to start a Sunday afternoon prayer meeting (Ibid: 338). By early summer some 30-40 people had become "praying Christian Eskimos," some of whom "have gone to settlements to the north and south of our own settlement and have taken the good
news" (Lopp 1895a: 419). Over the next few years Lopp was able to build on this base to some extent, and by 1901, the year after he left the mission, there were about 100 converts in the Wales area (Jackson 1902: 1475).

**Point Hope**

The Episcopal mission at Point Hope was opened in 1890 by John B. Driggs, a medical doctor from Delaware. For the first several years he devoted most of his attention to teaching and providing medical services. Through the provision of badly needed medical care, he attempted to create a climate receptive to the introduction of Christian concepts (VanStone 1962: 25, 1964: 23). Driggs did heroic medical and effective educational work at Point Hope, but was not particularly successful in obtaining conversions (Rainey 1941: 174).

By the end of the 15 years Driggs spent at Point Hope between 1890 and 1908, the Inupiat seem to have had more influence on him than he had had on them. From the viewpoint of the Episcopal Church he became "eccentric and absent" (Stuck 1920: 39). Accordingly, he was forced to give up his post. After an unhappy attempt to live in the continental United States, he returned to Alaska and spent the rest of his life as a member of the tiny Inupiaq community of Uivak, some 50 miles north of Point Hope (Thomas 1967: 65).

**Barrow**

The Presbyterian mission at Barrow was established in 1890 by Professor Leander M. Stevenson, from Ohio. Stevenson’s priorities apparently were teaching, medical care, and missionary work, in that order. His efforts were severely hindered by the repeated inability of the supply ship to reach Barrow, which meant that he was dependent for some years on a refuge station for (White) whalers for facilities (Stevenson 1893). In 1894-95 building materials finally reached him and he was able to erect a mission house.

However, in 1895 the government ship was unable to reach Barrow, causing him to shut down operations for lack of supplies. In addition to these logistic problems, much of Stevenson’s time after 1892 was taken up as keeper of the refuge station and in dealing with shipwrecked whalers generally.

Stevenson held religious services "as best he could under the circumstances" (Jackson 1897: 1446), but circumstances were not particularly favorable. His most successful activity in the religious field apparently lay in attracting people to song services (Spencer 1959: 380). It was left to his successor, Dr. Horatio Richmond Marsh, to preside over the first baptisms — nine years after the mission was established (Chambers 1970: 17). On Easter Sunday, 1899, Marsh formed a church of 13 members (Marsh 1900). Two years later it had a membership of 43 (Spriggs 1901).
Overall results of the early period

By 1897, after seven years of effort, the Congregationalist, Episcopalian and Presbyterian missionaries working in Arctic Alaska had saved many lives through medical treatment. They had also made some progress in teaching Inupiaq children the rudiments of arithmetic, the industrial arts, and speaking, reading and writing English. With regard to religious conversions, however, their record was modest: perhaps 75 converts at Wales, and none at either Point Hope or Barrow. Their Covenant colleagues at Golovin and Unalakleet had been more successful, with perhaps 125 converts, but of course they had had a three year head start.

The Friends mission at Kotzebue, 1897-1902

News of Christianity spread outside the four original mission-school communities in several ways. First, the regular movements of Inupiat from each community during the course of the seasonal round brought them into contact with people from other districts. Second, but more important, were the extensive interregional migrations that were going on at the time as people attempted to find food in the face of the terrible declines in major resources (bowhead whale, walrus, caribou) that had occurred over the previous three decades. Third, all of the missionaries visited smaller settlements for the express purpose of spreading the word. The leaders in this regard were the Covenant missionaries David Johnson and Uyaraq.

David Johnson was a young man who came to Unalakleet as a teacher in 1891 at the age of 19 (Almquist 1962: 59). He was one of the men who helped Lopp run the successful revival meeting at Wales in March 1895. Uyaraq, as noted previously, was the Inupiaq who was Axel Karlson’s first convert. Together, separately, and sometimes with Karlson, the two men traveled widely around Norton Sound and the Seward Peninsula, getting as far west as the Chukchi Peninsula and as far north as Kotzebue Sound (Almquist 1962: 48, 59).

Johnson and Uyaraq visited the Kotzebue area in the summer of 1896 to explore the possibility of establishing a permanent Covenant mission there (Anderson et al. 1987: 46-47). They addressed the people attending the trade fair (χειροτονία), which brought together more than a thousand Inupiat from all over northwestern Alaska for several weeks of trading, feasting, and athletic competition every summer. The two evangelists so inspired them, that when Sheldon Jackson passed through on the revenue steamer during his inspection tour of the schools, they asked him to establish a station there (California Yearly Meeting of Friends 1922: 2-3).

Apparently having already decided to assign the Kotzebue district to the Friends, Jackson told the Natives about their work in southeastern Alaska. Johnson and Uyaraq promptly
traveled by skin boat to Port Clarence, on the western end of the Seward Peninsula, caught a ship going south, and eventually wound up at the Friends mission in Douglas (Roberts 1981: 97). Excited by the fact that Natives would go to such efforts to seek a missionary, Charles Replogle traveled to California in the winter of 1897 and urged the California Yearly Meeting of Friends Church to establish a mission at Kotzebue (Roberts 1978: 162-163). A few months later, Anna Hunnicutt, and Robert and Carrie Samms answered the call.

Robert and Carrie Samms, and Anna Hunnicutt, were commissioned for service on May 17, 1897. Two days later, Robert, age 32, and Carrie, age 19, were married (Roberts 1978: 164). By the end of July they were in northwestern Alaska.

When the party arrived at its destination, they "found natives gathered from all parts of this northern country — from as far south as what is now Nome, from Point Hope on the north, from Siberia on the west, and from the Koyukuk on the east" (Samms and Samms ms), all there for the trade fair. Uyaraq, who had just established a base on the Selawik River, was also there. Although the Samms originally had intended to establish their mission on the Kobuk River, Uyaraq persuaded them to stay right where they were because the location provided access to a large region which included, but which was not limited to, the Kobuk valley. They accepted his advice (Anderson et al. 1987: 47, Roberts 1978: 170-176, Samms 1897-98).

Despite the apparently favorable circumstances which brought them there, the Friends were not universally welcomed. Like their counterparts at the other mission stations, they were frequently harassed by drunks and harangued by shamans. Several families opposed to Christianity established a new settlement at Napaaqtuqtuq, across the head of Kotzebue Sound. Nevertheless, the missionaries plunged right in, preaching the gospel, challenging the shamans, persuading people to abandon ancient burial customs, attacking polygamy, promoting Christian marriage, and fulminating against drinking, gambling, smoking and dancing. They also took full advantage of the summer trade fairs, initially with the help of Uyaraq, to preach to Inupiat from a huge region.6

The Samms made a point of attending messenger feasts at nearby villages (e.g., Hadley 1969: 35-36, 78, 79), although whether or not they were invited to do so is not clear. This enabled them to meet people from other districts, to preach against the sins of dancing, drinking, gambling and smoking, and to point the way to salvation to people who otherwise would not have heard their message. At one of these events, according to an Inupiaq eyewitness, they arrived just before the feasting began. Robert Samms inquired as to the purpose of some akutuuq (Eskimo "ice cream") stuck to the ceiling of the dance hall (qazgi). Informed that it was food for the devil (tuunraq), he went into a rage and spoiled the entire affair.

After two years of struggle, the Samms’ efforts began to bear fruit. On October 22, 1899, in a village of only 70 people, "twenty were taken into the church and five couples married" (Hadley 1969: 30). Five days later a number of others took the pledge, and the ranks of converts began to grow steadily. By June, 1900, after only three years of work,
70 members had been enrolled in the church "on profession of faith" (Jackson 1901: 1755).

Over the winter of 1900-01, people began burning the wood from the old platform graves around Kotzebue and breaking a variety of taboos (Samms 1900-01). Robert Samms kept a list of converts, and was very strict about who was on it. Individuals who broke their pledge not to drink or smoke were stricken from the list, as were those who engaged in sexual liaisons out of Christian wedlock.

Well before the Samms went on their first furlough, in the summer of 1902, a community of Inupiaq Christians had been firmly established in the Kotzebue Sound region (Jackson 1902: 1477). By that time there were 100 official members of the Friends Church (Roberts 1978: 215-16). The number of unofficial converts cannot be estimated, but must have been substantially larger than the official figure.

The faith and discipline of the converts were supported by the Samms’ replacements and by other additions to the ranks of White missionaries. They had to work hard to counteract some serious backsliding during the year following the Samms’ departure (Hadley 1969: 161-163), but the evidence suggests that, in general, the new faith within the Native community was both genuine and self-sustaining. Native converts held regular services wherever they were, regardless of whether or not Whites were present; they observed the Sabbath; they prayed before meals and before going to bed at night; they broke ancient taboos; they had marriages solemnized whenever they could get to Kotzebue; and they tried not to drink, gamble, smoke or dance.

The spread of Christianity from Kotzebue

Inupiat converted by the Friends at Kotzebue soon began to evangelize on their own, particularly along the Kobuk River. During the winter of 1900-01, Kobuk Inupiat held eight Sunday services, with an average attendance of 40. They reported that "a number of these (about 50) profess to be Christians, and there seems to be a general turning among the older ones to Christianity, even the chief expressing himself favorably to it" (Jackson 1903: 1254). At a Sunday service in Kotzebue on February 9, 1902, 71 people attended, including people "who either lived or have lived at" the Kugruk, Selawik and Buckland Rivers, and several small settlements along the north shore of Kotzebue Sound, as well as people from Kotzebue itself (Hadley 1969: 131). Also during that winter, one of the Inupiaq members, John Armstrong, made two evangelizing trips, one to the north shore of Kotzebue Sound, the other up the Noatak River (Hadley 1902: 43).

By the end of the following year, converts were scattered throughout the entire Kotzebue Sound drainage, and they had taken the word as far east as the Koyukuk River, nearly 300 miles away (Hadley 1969: 147). The new religion had also been taken to Point Hope by Inupiat from Kotzebue and the interior (Jackson 1904: 2362, Rainey 1941: 174,
It was then carried to Barrow both by Point Hopers, from the west, and by Colville River people, from the east (Stefansson 1951: 38).

Christianity reached the lower Colville River some time before 1908. When Vilhjalmur Stefansson arrived there in the fall of that year, the people "were all Christians and had been for several years" (1951: 81-82). Although guessing incorrectly that the ultimate source of this Christianity was Moravian missionaries, Stefansson (1951: 38) was quite specific in stating that it originated on Kotzebue Sound. From there, it had spread "northeastward up the Kuvuk [Kobuk] and Noatak rivers, thence across the Arctic Mountains [Brooks Range] and down the Colville River to the coast" (see also Jenness 1957: 31, 47, 175).

From northern Alaska, emigrant Alaskans took the new religion eastward to the Mackenzie Delta. Conversion there was sudden and massive, almost the entire population becoming Christian during the single winter of 1907-08 (Stefansson 1951: 38). Thus, in the space of a mere ten years, Inupiaq evangelists had spread the new religion over 900 miles east of its starting point on Kotzebue Sound.

On the Seward Peninsula, the Friends direct influence quickly reached at least as far west as Deering, where the Inupiaq evangelists were soon reinforced by missionaries from California. However, it may have stopped there as well. A group of Friends from Deering once visited Shishmaref, called a general meeting, and preached against drinking and smoking. The teacher at the time was Arthur Nagozruk, an influential Inupiaq from Wales, who rose and demanded to know where tobacco was mentioned in the Bible. The Quakers failed to respond satisfactorily, and the incident seems to have ended Quaker proselytizing toward the south (Flanders 1994).

**Discussion**

The transformation of the Arctic Inupiaq population from zero to nearly 100 percent Christianity in less than a single generation requires explanation. This general issue can be broken down into two specific questions: 1) Why were the Inupiat as amenable to conversion as they seem to have been? 2) Why were the Inupiat especially susceptible to the specific form of Christianity introduced by the Friends?

To my knowledge, only the first of these questions has been addressed previously, by Spencer (1959: 380-381) and by VanStone (1964: 23, 1980: 177). Both authors argued that the missions were effective primarily because they undermined the power of the shamans. I agree that that was an important consideration. But I also contend that it was only one, and by no means the most important, of a large number of factors all of which must be taken into account in order to understand the developments described above. The various elements in my own explanation are summarized below under the headings of "timing" and "world view."
Timing

Part of my explanation of prompt Christian conversion in Arctic Alaska is that the time was right. If the missionaries had appeared 50 or 100 years earlier, they probably would have been either driven out or killed. Even within this limited portion of my overall explanation, however, several elements are involved.

The most fundamental consideration here is that, beginning in the 1850s, but with particular force in the 1880s, the ecological foundations of the traditional social systems in Arctic Alaska were largely destroyed (Burch 1975: 26-30). The bowhead whale and walrus populations were drastically reduced by American whalers, the caribou population was all but exterminated by the Inupiat themselves, and epidemic diseases were introduced for the first time. The result was the decimation of the human population. Population loss, in turn, destroyed the political basis of the traditional social system because the several societies that comprised it no longer had enough members for collective self-defense. Because of these developments, which were particularly acute in the early 1880s, the first missionaries arrived among people in extremis, people whose traditional beliefs and practices had failed them. Given those circumstances, they must have been more willing to consider alternatives to their traditional beliefs than they ever had been previously.

A second element in correct timing was the fact that certain beliefs arose — apparently during the second half of the nineteenth century — that may have helped prepare people for the kind of religious change Christian missionaries eventually offered. These beliefs concerned the uivaqaats, souls of dead people who returned to earth in their original human form rather than in the form of a new baby to whom their name had been given, as would have been the case traditionally (Spencer 1959: 296-298, 381). Furthermore, the spirits of everyone who had died would all come back together, and they would bring with them everything that people on earth needed. The belief in uivaqaat thus provided a foundation within Inupiaq thought of the possibility of a sudden and momentous change in understanding of how the world worked.

Along the Kobuk River, there was an even more specific precursor of Christianity in the form of a prophet (sivuniqsraq) named Maniilaq. Maniilaq was apparently born on the upper Kobuk River some time prior to 1830, and he died there in the 1890s (Ramoth-Sampson, Newlin and Gray (eds.) 1981: vii-viii). In addition to a number of extraordinary personal qualities and activities, such as challenging shamans and ridiculing taboos, Maniilaq is said to have made a large number of prophecies many of which have come to pass. Included among the latter are 1) that a time will come when taboos imposed by shamans will no longer be kept, 2) that shamans will lose their power, and 3) that "the light will come in the form of the word". This last prophecy subsequently came to be interpreted as a prediction of the coming of Christianity (ibidem).8
Finally, in terms of timing, I note two factors that benefited the Friends missionaries particularly. The first is the fact that missionaries from the other churches had prepared the ground for them in several ways. First, they had demonstrated that Whites could come to their country with the welfare of Natives as a major concern; the Inupiat had never seen that before. Second, by providing solutions to medical problems that shamans could neither explain nor cure, they undermined the credibility of the most powerful opponents the missionaries had. Third, they made enough conversions to introduce to the people of the region the notion of religious change. And finally, by establishing themselves where they did, the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregationalist and Covenant missionaries made the people around Kotzebue Sound jealous for missionary attention.

The second factor that benefited the Friends was Uyaraq’s work on Kotzebue Sound and in the adjacent hinterland. Uyaraq did one thing that no White missionary could do convincingly, and that was deliberately and blatantly break powerful taboos without ill effect. Whites had been intermittently present in Arctic Alaska for at least 80 years before the Friends arrived, and it must have been clear to the Inupiat for most of that time that they could break taboos with impunity. One logical interpretation of this fact would have been that Whites were subject to a different set of rules than Inupiat. The same could not be said of Uyaraq.

Uyaraq’s most effective approach was deliberately to break taboos and to ridicule shamans while holding up a Bible. He did so while proclaiming that the book represented a spirit far more powerful than anything in the entire Inupiaq pantheon, and that this powerful spirit is what protected him. Uyaraq was particularly active at some of the summer trade fairs in the mid-1890s, where he could attract large audiences. His work not only undermined the shamans, it cast doubt on the entire Inupiaq belief system. It was just beginning to have an impact when the Friends arrived, but it must have greatly reduced their need to demonstrate the power of the Christian God vis-à-vis the spirits in whom the Inupiat believed.

World view

The second set of factors helping explain the conversion of the Inupiat to Christianity in general and to Quakerism in particular involves certain characteristics of the respective world views of traditional Inupiat and Christians, particularly as they relate to religion. These may be usefully elucidated in terms of a number of general "orientations" common to all religions.

Operational orientation: The "operational orientation" of a religion concerns whether it is exclusive or nonexclusive. Exclusive religions are those that are institutionalized in such a way that an individual may be oriented to one and only one religious system at any one time (Levy 1952: 514). Nonexclusive religions are all others. Christianity is clearly exclusive: one cannot, at least ideally, be both a Christian and, say, a Muslim at the same time. Traditional Inupiaq religion, like Hinduism, was nonexclusive. It was possible for
an Inupiaq to believe, simultaneously, both what he had learned from his elders and what he was taught by Christian missionaries, even when they contradicted one another. A Christian true believer might protest that such a mélange of beliefs would disqualify a person from being Christian. However, the key point is that this orientation of the Inupiat made them particularly amenable to missionary influence because they could accept new beliefs without having to reject the old.

Temporal orientation: The "temporal orientation" of a religion concerns the time frame of primary concern. Here there was a distinct difference between the Inupiat religion and Christianity. The latter is oriented to the future, in the sense that the ultimate objective of Christian practices and beliefs is to produce a particular state — salvation — at a point in time somewhere, but probably far, in the future. A related issue is the fact that Christians believe that each human body has an indestructible soul uniquely associated with it, and that eventually, perhaps long after death, that soul will end up either in heaven or in hell.

Inupiaq religion, on the other hand, was oriented to producing a particular state of affairs right away. The Inupiat believed that souls are indestructible, but that they are reincarnated in an endless succession of human bodies. To the Inupiat, there was no ultimate state of affairs one could anticipate that is fundamentally different from the one existing right now.

The contrasting temporal orientations of the two religions were a potential source of trouble for the missionaries, although the above-mentioned belief in uivaqsaat might have prepared at least some Inupiat for a change in this regard. However, many of the early converts simply did not comprehend the temporal orientation that is so central to Christian belief; or, more often, they believed that the results of proper Christian practice would be experienced in both this world and the next.

Technical orientation: The "technical orientation" of a religion concerns the extent to which it focuses on principles as opposed to practical results. A religion primarily oriented to principles is "moralistic," while one primarily oriented to practical results is "materialistic." Christianity is a moralistic religion in which sin and evil are contrasted with goodness and purity. Inupiaq religion, by contrast, was materialistic: its primary goal was to make life as safe and comfortable as possible.

The contrast between the traditional Inupiaq religion and Christianity with regard to technical orientation was profound, and, at least potentially, a major obstacle to conversion. Here again, though, many of the early Inupiat converts apparently did not comprehend the Christian perspective. They thought that if they followed certain practices, such as observing the Sabbath, they would achieve not only salvation in the next life, but also good health, good weather, and full stomachs in this one (Stefansson 1913a: 682, 1951: 97).
Substantive orientation: The "substantive orientation" of a religion concerns whether or not orientation to one or more supernatural entities is involved. A religion oriented to ultimate values directly — e.g., Soviet communism — is an ethical religion, whereas one oriented to ultimate values through one or more supernatural entities is a supernatural religion (Levy 1952: 512). Both Christianity and the traditional Inupiaq religion were supernatural. However, Christians, in general, believe in only one supernatural entity, God, whereas the Inupiat believed in dozens or even hundreds. These beliefs were consistent with the more general world views of Christians and traditional Inupiat regarding what might be called "substantive reality." The Christian world view is humanist: of the things of this world, only humans have souls. Each soul is uniquely associated with one human body, which it leaves only upon death, and to which it never returns. The Inupiat world view, by contrast, was animist. Every observable thing — every feature of the landscape, every animal, every object, every person — is imbued with a soul, or spirit. In addition, there are a number of nonempirical "creatures" having a wide variety of forms (Burch 1971, Stefansson 1914: 202, 267), as well as a variety of spirits having no material manifestation whatsoever. All of these spirits are capable of intentional action.

The difference in substantive orientation and perception between Christians and traditional Inupiat was, or could have been, another obstacle to conversion. It was, indeed, a problem for the Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Missionaries from these two religions disparaged animist beliefs as superstitious, hence at least implicitly stupid, and ridiculed people who held them. I do not know how the Congregationalists dealt with this problem, but Uyaraq and the Samms took a very different approach. Instead of denying the existence of the multitude of spirits in the traditional Inupiaq world, they simply declared them to be agents of the Devil. This made them evil, but also vulnerable to Christian attack. Given this interpretation, it was possible for Inupiat to become Christian without abandoning or even modifying their traditional world view (Stefansson 1913a: 680).

The views of Uyaraq and the Samms on these matters facilitated conversion in another way as well. Inupiaq shamans were able to perform a variety of incredible feats while their bodies were possessed by their familiar or some other spirit. Again, neither Uyaraq nor the Samms denied that this happened; they merely said that these spirits worked on behalf of the Devil. To become Christian, it was necessary to reject these evil spirits and to allow the Holy Ghost to possess one’s body instead. This argument was consistent with both the basic Quaker belief in the Inward Light — the presence of God in everyone (Keiser 1991), and the Inupiaq belief in spirit possession (Stefansson 1913a: 674-675).

Response orientation: The "response orientation" of supernatural religions concerns people’s understanding of the nature of the interaction between people, on the one hand, and the spirit or spirits through which religious goals are pursued, on the other. Christianity, or at least those forms of it not involving a belief in predestination, is "interactive." This is because it holds that one’s actions and beliefs can influence, but never determine, God’s judgement of one’s worth. Furthermore, one’s actions and beliefs...
can change over time, and thus so can God’s judgement. Traditional Inupiaq religion, by
contrast, was "mechanistic," because it envisioned a world in which specific practices
relating to particular spirits automatically produce specific outcomes.

The mechanistic Inupiaq view of the world was manifest in the universal use of amulets
(physical objects with magical power) and charms (sayings or songs with magical
power), and in adherence to a bewildering number and variety of taboos (Ostermann and
When these devices and practices were used or followed properly, they forced the spirits
to keep from disrupting things. When they were not used or followed properly,
misfortune of one kind or another automatically followed (Stefansson 1953: 13).
Unfortunately, people rarely discovered that a taboo existed until they had already broken
it. Ignorance alone condemned the Inupiat to live in a world that is far from the idyllic
place that it should be in theory. Forgetfulness and misbehavior only exacerbated the
problem.

Ecclesiastical orientation: The "ecclesiastical orientation" of a religion has to do with the
extent to which the roles and activities involved are specialized ("clerical religions") or
generalized ("secular religions"). The traditional Inupiaq religion may be characterized as
having been relatively secular, because, although the specialized role of shaman
(anâtkqu) was recognized, it could be filled by everyone who could communicate with
and/or control one or more familiar spirits. Furthermore, being a shaman was a matter of
degree; some shamans could communicate with or control many more spirits than others
could. No one was automatically excluded.

Christian churches and denominations vary profoundly from one another with regard to
ecclesiastical orientation. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is highly clerical;
most Protestant denominations are relatively less so. Of the denominations of interest
here, the Episcopalians are the most clerical, followed by the Presbyterians,
Congregationalists, Covenants and Friends, respectively.

The Friends, with their emphasis on openness and spontaneity in worship, their belief in
the Inward Light, and their rejection of most sacraments (Cooper 1990), are nearly as
secular in belief and practice as the traditional Inupiat were. The Quaker perspective
was important in Arctic Alaska because it empowered every believer who felt the call to
act as a missionary.

The nature of early Christianity in Arctic Alaska

The above analysis leads to an important matter that has been addressed only indirectly
up to this point: the form that Christianity took among the Inupiat of Arctic Alaska during
the years immediately following conversion. Stefansson’s (1951: 415) view of the matter
is as follows:
there grew up among them what might be called an Eskimoized Christianity, in other words, Christianity comprehensible to the Eskimos. The real Christianity had had great trouble taking root, but this new form spread like the measles.

This assessment distressed the Anglican missionary Whitaker (1937: 68-69) and the Quaker historian Roberts (1978: 119-120, 226), but the evidence overwhelmingly supports Stefansson’s position. When I interviewed elders in northern Alaska myself, 60 years later, their remarks led me directly to the same conclusion.12

Christianity, as understood by many, if not most, of the early converts, involved the interplay between one munificent spirit — God, and one evil one — the Devil. To promote the victory of the former over the latter, they thought that Christianity, like the traditional Inupiaq religion, required the use of amulets — in the form of the Bible; charms or spells — in the form of hymns and prayers; and taboos — in the form of prohibitions against smoking, dancing, gambling, drinking and failing to observe the Sabbath, as well as the Ten Commandments. If the amulets and charms were used correctly and the prohibitions were obeyed, salvation in the next world and a better life in this one were expected to come about automatically (Jenness 1918: 99-100, 1957: 47, Stefansson 1914: 340-341, 1951: 8991, 410-412, 416-417).

When Inupiat heard about the miracles described in the Bible, they were unimpressed, for they personally had seen or experienced similar phenomena throughout their lives (Lopp 1892: 390, Stefansson 1913a: 680-681, 1914: 222-223, 1951: 391, 402-407). Furthermore, these miracles did not cease when conversion took place:

There are also in every community Eskimo who are in the habit of visiting heaven and conferring there with Christ Himself, with Saint Peter and others, quite in the manner in which they used to visit the moon while still heathen and have discussions with the man in the moon. The man in the moon used to teach the shamans songs and spells, and now St. Peter teaches the deacons of the Eskimo church hymns and chants . . . (Stefansson 1951: 431).

There were also "frequent and weighty revelations in the matter of doctrine" (ibid.: 432), but these were often kept hidden from the missionaries after the Inupiat learned they did not approve of present-day revelation.

One area of true syncretism lay in the importance of confession. As Stefansson (1914: 128) noted, "one of the most fundamental of the religious ideas of the Eskimo is this, that supernatural punishments come not so much on account of evil things being done as on account of their remaining unconfessed." One of the features of Friends gatherings in Arctic Alaska is public confession of wrongdoing, which is seen as a necessary first step on the road to redemption.

Most of the early missionaries realized that the first converts had adopted an "Eskimoized" version of Christianity. Stefansson’s views on the subject, for example, were informed not only through conversations with and observations of Inupiat, but also
through discussions with Horatio Marsh, the Presbyterian missionary at Barrow. The early White missionaries were alternately distressed, amused and touched by the Natives’ misunderstandings of the similarities and differences between their old religion and Christianity (see Hadley 1969: 185, 188, Jackson 1896: 1488, Marsh 1900), but almost all of them recognized that they existed.\textsuperscript{13}

Conclusion

The significant role of Christianity in village life in Arctic Alaska made a profound impression on me when I first arrived there in the fall of 1960. Like others before me, I was also struck by the influence of Friends beliefs and practices on people belonging to other denominations.\textsuperscript{14} This paper is an attempt to describe and explain how this situation came into being.

The main point I wish to make in conclusion is that no single factor accounts for the rapid spread of Christianity in Arctic Alaska. I would even caution against the temptation to assign primacy to one or two of the many factors mentioned in this paper. It required \textit{all} of them, acting in conjunction with one another, for the new religion to spread so quickly over such a large area.

Conditions in Arctic Alaska were conducive to religious change in the 1890s. However, there was little common ground between the traditional Inupiaq religion and Christianity, and rapid conversion was by no means a foregone conclusion. It was achieved, in part, because the Natives confused many of the forms of Christianity with its substance. Many people truly believed they had become Christians long before the missionaries thought so. In addition, and in contrast to the other missionaries, Uyaraq and the Samms had an uncanny ability to turn the Inupiaq definition of the situation to Christian advantage by interpreting traditional beliefs and practices in ways that made sense in terms of both religions. This, along with basic Quaker notions of anticlericalism and individual empowerment, is what made them so successful.

Once a few conversions had taken place, Native evangelists could and did spread the new religion quickly. Uyaraq’s shocking demonstration of the power of the Christian God was repeated in dozens of tiny settlements every winter, as new believers conspicuously broke ancient taboos in front of their heathen relatives, partners and friends without bringing disaster down upon them. Confronted with this example, facing an uncertain future in which the ancient social and environmental foundations of life had fallen apart, and offered relief from the crushing burden of taboos that had controlled their lives for so long, it is no wonder that so many Inupiat accepted the new religion with enthusiasm.

On a more general level, the Christianization of Arctic Alaska seems to have involved two processes common to successful missionary efforts: indigenization and syncretism. As defined by Gualtieri (1984: 1), the former denotes "a process of cultural adaptation in which the fundamental meanings of an historical tradition are retained but expressed in symbolic forms of another, diverse culture." Syncretism, on the other hand, is a "form of cultural encounter in which the traditions entailed are fused . . . into a novel emergent
whose meanings and symbolic expressions are in some respects different from either of the original singular traditions.”

Syncretism was probably the more dominant of the two processes in Arctic Alaska. This was partly because of the few genuine similarities between the traditional Inupiat religion and particularly the Friends form of Christianity. In this respect, the situation in Arctic Alaska probably did not differ much from successful missionary efforts elsewhere in the world. More unusual, and more important, was the fact that Uyaraq and the Samms managed to impose Christian interpretations on a number of traditional Inupiaq beliefs that differed sharply from those of Christians. They created the illusion of syncretism where it did not really exist, then turned it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The foundation of Christianity in Arctic Alaska was laid by Uyaraq and by Robert and Carrie Samms between 1897 and 1902. Uyaraq stayed in the region for the rest of his life, and the Samms served there periodically until 1947, but they never regained the influence they had had at the start. Their contribution was to found a community of Christian Inupiat on Kotzebue Sound. From then on the new religion had a force of its own. The Inupiat carried out the Christianization of most of Arctic Alaska themselves, and they accomplished it in a remarkably short period of time.