The Christian missions to the coastal peoples of British Columbia and southwestern Alaska were among the most famous during the 19th-century high point of missionary expansion. Missionaries, as well as supporters and detractors, published innumerable articles and books and left behind massive archives. Until recently, scholarly attention to the missionary enterprise on the northwest coast was limited to standard mission histories and biographies and occasional anthropological studies of acculturation (see Barker 1988). Lately, however, several scholars have turned their attention to indigenous responses to the early missionaries and, in particular, to the ways in which local peoples appropriated, resisted, or succumbed to the institutions and cultural assumptions introduced by the missionaries (Blackman 1973; Bolt 1992; Harkin 1990, 1993). Some have also paid attention to a more home-grown concern: the systematic physical and emotional abuse suffered by aboriginal children in church-run residential schools (e.g., Miller 1996). In contrast, with the exception of Sergei Kan’s excellent studies of the Russian Orthodox church in Tlingit communities (Kan 1985, 1987, 1991), virtually no attention has been paid to contemporary Christianity. I do not intend here to grapple with the reasons for this neglect, although a critique is sorely needed. Instead, I wish to explicate some of the complexities and ambiguities entailed by the continuing presence of the historical mission churches in First Nations communities, focusing on the Anglican Church and the Nisga’a.

Nisga’a villages, like most other Native communities on the northwest coast, continue to be served by founding mission churches. The Salvation Army and the Anglican Church, however, have an unusually large presence. Local clergy are Nisga’a, mostly from chiefly families, and the village churches are commodious, attractive, and well constructed with labor and funds from congregations. The Nisga villages also stand apart in their lack of overt Christian sectarianism. Each of the four villages has a single church. Apart from these admittedly important differences, however, the contemporary Christian scene among the Nisga’a seems little different.

In the late 1960s, after decades of neglect, the Anglican Church of Canada redeployed considerable resources to the Nisga’a, a people with whom it had deep missionary ties. In this article I examine the nature of this new relationship and the motivations behind it. The efforts of the contemporary Anglican Church among the Nisga’a are best understood, I argue, as an attempt at reconciliation following a rejection in the national church of earlier assimilationist projects. The Nisga’a reception of the church’s outreach, however, was born out of a different process of reconciliation: between indigenous cultural forms and political needs and aspirations, on the one hand, and mission Christianity, which had already developed into a vernacular expression of Christianity in the Nass valley, on the other. I thus explore the politics of religious synthesis in the postmissionary world, a synthesis that occurs simultaneously at local and global levels (northwest coast, Nisga’a, missions, Christianity, land claims, syncretism).
from what one would find in other coastal communities. Except for Christmas and Easter services and funerals, very few people attend church services, and most of those who do are quite elderly. There has been a resurgence of pride and interest in indigenous traditions over the past quarter-century. This has been strongly endorsed by church leaders. Elders insist that Christianity and indigenous religious beliefs are compatible. Apart from some prayers and sermons in the Nisga’a language, however, only modest attempts had been made by 1994 to incorporate Nisga’a art and culture into church activities. The established churches face two main religious challenges. The first comes from Pentecostal and fundamentalist sects, whose preachers—often themselves of First Nations ancestry—attract enthusiastic crowds to revivals, especially in the cities where large numbers of Nisga’a now live. The second challenge comes from young Nisga’a who reject the churches as imposed colonial institutions.

Whatever the future of the older churches in First Nations villages, they have remained a presence well past the time of missionary domination. Why is this? What importance do the older churches have in Native communities today?

The answer to the first question, at least in the case of the Nisga’a, seems to rest more immediately on recent developments than on the missionary roots of the local church. In the first part of this article, I argue that the emergence of a social activist faction in the Anglican Church of Canada in the mid-1960s was of key importance. The Nisga’a land case, the first aboriginal rights case in Canada to be presented to the federal Supreme Court, gave Anglican activists an ideal cause that might help to erase the stigma of earlier complicity in the theft of Native lands and freedoms. For their part, the embattled Nisga’a appreciated the church’s practical and moral support. As Nisga’a leaders drew parish clergy into the complex land claims process, the new partners also negotiated a devolution of power to the local church and the creation of a Nisga’a clergy. The church is important to many Nisga’a because of these projects, but that is only one part of its significance to them. To understand its deeper significance one must go further back to the missionary period. In the second part of the article, I sketch a history that highlights ways in which Nisga’a remolded mission Christianity to fit their own religious, social, and political needs. In the process, a kind of “vernacular Christianity” emerged to form the necessary basis for the development of a partnership between Nisga’a and the Anglican Church in the late 1960s (cf. Mosse 1994).

The title of this article alludes to these two historically discreet engagements between the Nisga’a and the Anglican Church. The church activists who joined the Nisga’a cause in the 1960s were motivated in part by a deep dismay over the actions of their missionary ancestors. Their reengagement with the Nisga’a, in its many facets, was an act of reconciliation initiated by the church. The earlier Nisga’a struggles to appropriate and redefine Christianity in terms of the challenges they faced as a dispossessed people was another kind of reconciliation, between Anglican Christianity and (broadly speaking) Nisga’a culture. The contemporary church in the Nisga’a villages can thus be understood as emerging out of two distinct but mutually entangled attempts to reconcile differences. This article is thus a contribution to recent discussions of the “politics of religious synthesis” (Stewart and Shaw 1994), a point that I address in the conclusion.

the Hendry report and the beginnings of Anglican activism

Following World War II, the Canadian federal government usurped the last area of significant missionary control over aboriginal peoples by taking complete charge of education.2 The final phaseout of church-run residential schools in the 1960s occurred during a period of increasing social ferment. The civil rights movement of the United States and the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. provided an inspiration for Canadian Anglicans reflecting upon the inequities in their own country. In 1967 the Anglican General Synod commissioned a sociological assessment of its relationship with aboriginal peoples. The resulting document, Beyond Traplines
(Hendry 1969), gently but in devastating detail revealed the church's complicity in a system that had severely oppressed Native peoples. The Hendry report became and continues to be the key document guiding the church's attempt to change its relationship with the First Nations from one of paternalistic supervision to "partnership" and "service." The synod approved the recommendations of the report. Activists have since worked hard to keep the Hendry report in the minds of church leaders and to push for funds, special committees, and resolutions to make sure that its recommendations are applied.4

The Hendry report and the initiatives that it generated gave activists within and outside the main church office access to a much wider forum in which to lobby for aboriginal rights, and to cash and expertise that could be channeled to Native organizations. Reforms focused on three areas. First, the church leaders and membership were to engage in "solidarity actions" with Native organizations in support of treaty and land negotiations, Native self-government, and the end of the much reviled Indian Act (the legislative basis of federal control over Native lives and resources). In 1975 the Anglican, United, and Roman Catholic churches of Canada committed Can $25,000 to the development of a communications, research, and liaison coalition in support of aboriginal rights (Hamel n.d.b). Project North (now the Aboriginal Rights Committee) quickly developed a significant presence in national debates on northern development and aboriginal rights. Two chapters are currently active in British Columbia. By the mid-1980s, grants to Native organizations "in support of social, economic, legal and political projects" from the Anglicans alone averaged between Can $75,000 and Can $100,000 a year (Hamel n.d.a:11).

Second, the church undertook internal reforms to increase the presence and influence of Native Anglicans. This began with the decision to form a subcommittee (elevated in 1980 to the status of a council) of Natives who could advise the primate and synod on matters of aboriginal concern. The church has also made efforts to have Native representatives on the regular councils and committees at the diocesan, provincial, and national levels. The church began sponsoring Native clergy conferences in 1976. During the 1980s the Council on Native Affairs addressed the need for culturally appropriate forms of leadership and worship in the church. In 1988 the council called a national Native Convocation and has since participated in ecumenical gatherings of aboriginal peoples and the formation of a working group to examine the impact of the Anglican residential schools on Native communities.

The third area of reform entailed the acceptance and encouragement of indigenous forms of worship and belief. Through the early 1970s, for example, the Anglican Church supported the Indian Ecumenical Conferences, which included both Christians and "persons with some hostility to the church" (Grant 1984:211).5 In 1989 the General Synod endorsed the principle of reviewing forms of church participation in light of Native traditions and concerns.

While this listing should give an idea of the range of initiatives taken by church leaders, it obviously cannot indicate anything of the intensity of the debates they have generated. The participants I have met, both in British Columbia and in the Toronto head office, argue incessantly over the depth, the reality, of these changes. Some activists decry the changes as mere window dressing. At the other extreme, their critics point to the steadily declining membership of the Anglican Church, suggesting that well-meaning but "misguided" attempts to redress the past serve mainly to push white parishioners into the arms of more conservative churches (Bibby 1993; Graham 1990). The connection here is debatable, but it is certainly true that the Anglican Church has descended steadily into a financial crisis that is already affecting its ability to undertake initiatives and to subsidize the poorer dioceses.6 That most church leaders remain firmly committed to the active support of Native issues despite the financial challenges would seem to indicate a genuine change of heart. The only way to know that the initiatives have made a practical difference, of course, is to look at how they have played out in particular Native constituencies like the Nisga'a.
the Calder case

The Nisga'a have "since time immemorial" occupied the lands surrounding the Nass River, which flows into the Pacific Ocean just south of the Alaska panhandle. The Nisga'a Tribal Council recently estimated the total population at 6,000 people, 2,500 of whom live in four communities in the traditional territory and the remainder elsewhere in the country (NTC 1992). Most of the Nisga'a residing in the Nass make their living from fishing and forestry, although the decline in these industries is forcing many people onto the welfare rolls. The three largest villages of New Aiyansh (Gitlakdamix), Greenville (Lalakzap), and Kincolith (Gingolx) are Anglican, while the smallest village of Canyon City (Gitwinkshilkw) has a Salvation Army church. The Nisga'a are one of five Native groups that make up about half the membership of the Diocese of Caledonia, which sprawls across the upper half of British Columbia.

The Nisga'a and the Anglican Church have developed a remarkably close and public association since the late 1960s, as exemplified by the career of the present bishop of the Diocese of Caledonia, the Right Reverend John Hannen. Hannen served as parish priest in Kincolith for almost a decade before being elected bishop. He is an adopted Nisga'a. I first met the bishop at the 1993 Nisga'a Tribal Convention in Terrace. At the conference he participated in several high committee meetings in sessions closed to non-Nisga'a, spoke at length after the convention dinner about Nisga'a's spiritual ties to the land, and performed the closing benediction. Several people (including one man otherwise very critical of Bishop Hannen) recommended that I listen to a tape of a 1991 address he gave in Greenville to mark the signing of an important framework agreement for land negotiations between the Nisga'a and the provincial and federal governments. This was described as a powerful statement of the Nisga'a worldview.

The immediate context for understanding the partnership between Anglican and Nisga'a leadership is the Nisga'a Tribal Council's long campaign to settle the people's land claim and establish a form of self-government. As late as 1990, British Columbia was the only province in Canada that did not recognize some form of aboriginal title. During the late 19th century the provincial legislature assigned Native groups, including the Nisga'a, to tiny reserves, averaging just 11 acres per person, opening the remainder of their lands to settlers and commercial interests. Although far from Victoria and Ottawa, the Nisga'a organized the first and most influential Native campaign against this expropriation, forming their own Land Committee in the 1890s and carrying their case to Victoria, Ottawa, and even London. The federal government effectively outlawed the pursuit of land claims in 1927. When the ban was quietly lifted in 1951, the Nisga'a once again were among the first to resume open campaigning to force the government into treaty negotiations.

The Nisga'a resurgence was led by Frank Calder. From an early age Calder had been groomed for the chiefly rank that he would receive from his adopted mother, Louisa. His father, Arthur, had been a leading figure on the Land Committee for decades. After graduating from Coqualeetza residential school in 1937, Calder attended the Anglican Theological College at the University of British Columbia, attaining a divinity degree in 1946. He became an active leader in the Native Brotherhood, an organization representing First Nations on the north coast, eventually rising to the office of secretary. In 1949, Calder became the first Native Canadian elected to a provincial legislature. He represented Atlin in the provincial legislature until 1975, serving in the short-lived New Democratic Party cabinet in 1972–73 and frequently speaking out on aboriginal matters (McCordle 1996; Tennant 1990).

Calder was also one of the founders of the Nisga'a Tribal Council, on which he served as president from 1955 to 1974. In September 1967, with an eye on the Canadian centennial celebrations then occurring, Calder and seven other chiefs took the unprecedented act of suing the provincial government. On behalf of the Nisga'a people, the plaintiffs asked for a declaration from the supreme court of British Columbia "that the aboriginal title (also known as Indian title)
of the Plaintiffs to their ancient tribal territory has never been lawfully extinguished" (as cited in Raunet 1984:150). The case came to trial almost two years later, with the Nisga’a represented by Vancouver lawyer Thomas Berger. The provincial government succeeded in convincing the justices that aboriginal title did not exist at the time of “discovery” and settlement of British Columbia and that, even if it had, it had been extinguished by colonial legislation passed in Victoria prior to the 1871 confederation with Canada. A year later, the British Columbia appeals court upheld this ruling unanimously, clearing the way for an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. The federal court’s decision on the “Calder case” came down in January 1973. One justice ruled against the plaintiffs on procedural grounds and refused to give his opinion on the direct questions before the court. Quite unexpectedly, the remaining six judges concurred that aboriginal title had existed at the time of contact. They split three to three on the key question of whether title had been extinguished. With the seventh justice ruling against the plaintiffs on different grounds, the Nisga’a effectively lost their case, but only by a hair. Neither the federal or provincial governments could count on rulings in their favor in future aboriginal title cases that were certain to come (Tennant 1990:219–221).

Most observers believe that the Calder case nudged the federal government toward negotiations with the First Nations over land and other rights (Cruickshank 1996). Federal agents opened direct negotiations with Nisga’a leaders in 1976. Talks proceeded at a glacial pace until 1990, when the provincial government reversed its adamant opposition to land claims and joined the negotiations. On February 15, 1996, representatives of the Nisga’a Tribal Council and the provincial and federal governments initialed an agreement in principle. The agreement includes a cash payment of Can $190 million over a period of years, the establishment of a form of self-government over 2,000 kilometers of territory in the Nass valley, and certain entitlements to migratory salmon and wild animal stocks (Powell and Jensen 1996). As the model for future treaties in British Columbia, the Nisga’a agreement sparked controversy, particularly in northern regions, and became a point of contention in the provincial election held later that year. With the return to power of the New Democratic Party and the support of the federal government, the treaty is expected to take effect in 1998.

Despite the excruciatingly slow pace of the negotiations, the Nisga’a have steadily won concessions over the years. In 1976 they became the first Native community in Canada to gain control of their own school district and have since developed a profitable investment and enterprise development organization, conducted a major survey of land use and ownership in the claims area, set up their own health services, and created a Nisga’a college. Although the council has yet to gain authority to manage and tax the outside fishing, mining, and logging companies that exploit their traditional territories, Nisga’a do now have input into some decisions in their territories via Nisga’a representatives sitting on several regional planning boards. Through all of these developments, the Nisga’a leaders have sought to strengthen and formalize the traditional institutions within which ranked names are passed on and validated. These eternal names are linked to the 65 matrilineal “houses” (wilp): the traditional owners of Nisga’a lands and traditions and thus the basis of Nisga’a sovereignty. A “unity pole” raised before the new school in Aiyansh in 1977 and bearing the crests of the major clans symbolizes a consensus that Nisga’a political unity rests upon the people’s shared language and culture (Inglis et al. 1990:290).

revival of the Nass churches

About the time Calder and his associates took the government to court, the Diocese of Caledonia resumed its interest in the Nass church after a long period of neglect. The bishop posted three young white priests to Aiyansh, Greenville, and Kincolith. The three (John Blyth, David Retter, and John Hannen) relished the experience of living in remote Indian communities.
They participated in the full round of public activities, including feasts that had been avoided by many of their predecessors. They appear, in turn, to have been accepted by most local people: each received a Nisga'a name, and each remained in the Nass for at least a decade. They provided the link by which the diocese and the national church renewed and strengthened relationships with the Nisga'a.14

The church's initiatives during these years can be discussed in terms of advocacy work and the development of a Nisga'a ministry, activities that were in many ways related. The arrival of idealistic, university-trained men at the start of the Calder case (which had stretched the Nisga'a Tribal Council's resources to the limit) was fortunate: the Nisga'a could make use of their facility with written English and of their connections. Articles and pictures describing the life and culture of the Nisga'a, their unjust treatment, and the blow-by-blow development of the court case began to fill diocesan and national Anglican newspapers. Late in 1970 the primate's World Relief and Development Fund granted the Nisga'a Tribal Council Can $10,000 in support of their appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. It is a measure of the close ties that developed between Nisga’a leaders and the church that the latter asked John Blyth to accompany the delegation presenting the case before the Supreme Court in 1971. The group also met with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and may have played a part in persuading him to recognize the justice, or at least the inescapability, of aboriginal demands.15

The Calder case captured a great deal of public attention, but the press lost interest in the Nisga’a land question once direct negotiations began. The impression that aboriginal concerns were at last being met hid the reality that Nisga’a lands and waters were being stripped of their resources at an ever-increasing rate.16 The Anglican Church continued to provide the Nisga’a with some help in publicizing their situation. The church network proved invaluable in one issue that gained international attention. In early 1980 the Nisga’a Tribal Council got wind of a plan by the AMAX Corporation to dump millions of metric tons of tailings from its molybdenum mine into Alice Arm, a major Nisga’a fishing area. Both the federal and the provincial governments had quietly issued permits allowing the dumping of heavy metals, radium 226, and other toxins without environmental or social reviews. Project North carried the Nisga’a campaign to the national level, and the Anglican Primate issued petitions opposing the dumping to every parish in the country. In an effort to get Nisga’a voices heard, Anglican activists purchased AMAX shares and turned them over to a Nisga’a delegation. This allowed the Nisga’a to present a motion against the dumping at the shareholders’ meeting in New York City in 1981. This symbolic gesture failed to sway enough shareholders, but the bad publicity may have influenced AMAX's decision to mothball the mine a few months later when the world price of molybdenum fell.

Meanwhile, back in the Nass, the Anglican hierarchy committed itself to the localization of the church. While spurred by the new national consensus that Native peoples should gain more control over the local church, this actually entailed the resumption of an old project. As we shall see later, one of the early missionaries had worked tirelessly to lay the foundations of a local church some 70 years earlier. J. B. McCullagh hand-selected and trained a small group of men who played leading roles in both the Nass churches and the land movement for decades. The Caledonia bishops did little to build on this base after McCullagh's death in 1920. The most accomplished of “McCullagh's men,” Paul Mercer, served for years as a low-paid catechist in each of the Nass villages. In 1953 the bishop of the time ordained him as deacon, raising him to the priesthood two years later. Once this seed for a Nisga’a priesthood had been planted, however, white church leaders again seemed to lose interest. When Mercer drowned in a spring flood in 1965, the Nass valley was once again left without a resident priest (Caledonia Diocesan Times 1965).

When the Caledonia hierarchy finally did turn its attention to the localization of the Nass church, its task was made considerably easier in that the Nisga’a had themselves informally
localized church practices during the decades of neglect by the mother church. The Church
Army provides a good example. Modeled upon the Salvation Army and practicing a colorful
revivalist Christianity, the Church Army was one of the most popular and enduring of the
initiatives undertaken by the missionaries a century ago. Over a period of time, as they loosened
their supervision of the Nass churches, the Anglican hierarchy became suspicious of the Church
Army, seeing it as a real or potential haven of Pentecostal rivals. Bishop David Hambidge ended
the long standoff in the 1970s with a number of supportive gestures, including an annual
convention for the Army branches across the diocese.

Efforts undertaken to rewrite the liturgy in the Nisga’a language also marked a recognition
and endorsement of the practices established by the Nisga’a themselves. From the beginning
of the missionary period, Nisga’a was the preferred language of worship. The Nisga’a layreaders
who ran the local churches on their own for many years are remembered for the brilliance of
their oratory and the beauty of their language. After the deaths of the first generation of
missionaries, however, Nisga’a did not hear the full liturgy in their own language, for no white
priest could speak Nisga’a. Around 1970, John Blyth asked the linguist Bruce Rigsby, who had
developed an orthography of Nisga’a, to work with Hubert McMillan and other elders in
preparing the Anglican service in the vernacular. McMillan did most of the translating and has
since translated several other sacred works. This project had two spinoffs. First, it helped pave
the way for the development of a bilingual and bicultural program in the Nisga’a language,
which became the core program of the school when the Nisga’a assumed administrative control
in 1976. Second, it raised serious questions about the way the church had gone about selecting
and training clergy to work in the Indian parishes. Men like Hubert McMillan, who lacked formal
schooling but were deeply knowledgeable in both Nisga’a traditions and the Bible, had not
been allowed to rise above the level of lay reader or Church Army captain. This changed in
1976, when Bishop Hambidge ordained Hubert McMillan as a priest. By the mid-1980s, other
men who, like McMillan, had long served in lay positions, had been ordained as deacons and
priests and had been given charge of the Nass churches. This experience led the diocese to
rethink its educational policy concerning Native clergy. In recent years it has taken a leading
role in the development of the Native Ministries Consortium at the Vancouver School of
Theology, an interdenominational action group developing theological education programs
accessible to Native peoples and appropriate to the needs and financial resources available in
Native communities. As I noted earlier, the church has also opened its committees and action
groups to Native peoples, including Nisga’a, thus creating closer ties between the local and
regional church.

The 1970s also saw the introduction of button blankets and Nisga’a art into churches and
church services. Most Nisga’a seem to be pleased to see the bishop and local clergy in traditional
regalia, but some elders here, as in Tsimshian and Gitksan villages I have visited, felt that such
symbols, while appropriate for feasts and other indigenous ceremonies, did not belong in the
church. Reforms in this direction have thus far been quite limited, especially when compared
with analogous changes in African and Pacific Island churches.

While the actions of the church to establish a new relationship with the Nisga’a are
impressive, it must be remembered that the Nisga’a themselves took the first significant step by
adopting the white priests into the clans when they ceremonially gave them ancestral names.
As far as I can determine, this innovation dates from the late 1960s. Since that time, Nisga’a
leaders have given names to the four white priests who served in Nass villages in the 1970s and
early 1980s: two bishops and two primates of the Anglican Church of Canada. One of the
Nisga’a priests explained to me that this action was like conferring an honorary degree at a
university: it is an act recognizing the contributions a person has made to the community. The
names, he pointed out, must return to their respective houses at the deaths of their holders. The
names represent more than respect for the church; no less significantly, they oblige the
recipients to do their best to serve their Nisga’aa “family.” This is taken seriously by both sides. The Reverend J. A. Mackenzie, for example, has served as an appointed member of the Nisga’aa Tribal Council since 1979. He has chaired several important educational committees and works as a member on others, including working groups involved in the land negotiations. Mackenzie’s very visibility in the Nisga’aa high councils sends a message about Nisga’aa acceptance of the church. The adoptions thus form a kind of cultural baptism of the clergy.

Enough has been said at this point to support two broad generalizations. First, church localization, like self-government, has not so much separated as increased the Nisga’aa’s level of involvement in and integration into the church at both the diocesan and the national levels. The second observation is that the synergy between the Anglican Church and Nisga’aa people in the later 20th century cannot be adequately explained merely as an act of reconciliation between the two. The revival of Anglican fortunes in the Nass villages rested heavily on earlier Nisga’aa accommodations to mission Christianity.

the Anglican mission and the emergence of Nisga’aa Christianity

Over several weeks in the fall of 1994, I interviewed 21 elders living in New Aiyansh, Greenville, and Canyon City. Most were in their seventies, and all had long been active members of the local church for most of their adult lives. All of them spoke, with regret, of a time when the churches were well attended and villagers regularly engaged in church associations. It is easy to dismiss such stories as nostalgia, but there is abundant evidence to indicate that the churches did form a central part of people’s lives in the recent past, particularly before roads penetrated the Nass valley in the late 1950s. The high point of local church participation occurred during a long period when the Anglican Church provided only sporadic attention to the Nass villages. In addition to oral testimonies, the strongest evidence today for the past strength of local congregations is the continuing practice of making huge donations of funds to the church during memorial feasts. These and other donations, in turn, have been used by local congregations to construct commodious new churches. The emergence of “vernacular Christianity” in the years following the initial missionary advance has thus far largely remained a unacknowledged facet of First Nations history. Recovering that history is becoming more and more difficult as the generations that grew up on the coast prior to the early 1950s pass away.

As elsewhere in the missionized world, Christian ideologies were not passively accepted by the Nisga’aa but were “actively interpreted in local contexts and put to use within culturally constituted spheres of interest and activity” (White 1991:179). In particular, Nisga’aa applied their interpretation of Christianity to pressing political concerns. In the course of this appropriation, Nisga’aa reshaped both indigenous and introduced institutions. The religious synthesis that developed in the Nass deserves fuller treatment. For my purposes here, however, it is enough to sketch its development and main characteristics, as I discuss in the following four sections.

Initial adoption of Christianity by the Nisga’aa  Mission history in the Nass valley starts in 1860, when two chiefs warmly welcomed the Anglican lay missionary William Duncan to their villages and asked that they be provided with missionaries of their own (Patterson 1981). Duncan had himself begun the first mission on the north coast, at Fort Simpson in 1857. He wrote enthusiastically to his superiors in the Church Missionary Society about prospects of work among the Nisga’a. New recruits were duly posted. Duncan and his Tsimshian followers soon went on to establish Metlakatla, one of the most famous and controversial mission “colonies” of its time (Fisher 1977; Murray 1985; Usher 1974). For better or worse, the Nass mission took shape in the shadow of the Metlakatla experiment and reflected many of the assumptions behind it. The first missionaries to the Nisga’aa adopted their own strategy of establishing mission colonies modeled on rural English villages with the intention of displacing the indigenous order.
Both Kincolith and Aiyansh were created as miniature versions of Metlakatla: highly regulated communities under authoritarian missionaries meant both to inculcate “Christian” values into new converts and serve as bases of operations against surrounding pagan villages. James Benjamin McCullagh came closest to achieving this goal during the three decades he dominated Aiyansh (Moeran 1923). The former military man raised funds from English supporters to start a sawmill, a tannery, a boatyard, a cannery, and other industrial projects meant both to provide the community with supplies and to counter the need for seasonal migration to the coast for food and work. The people lived in “pretty cottages,” “inspected every Saturday by our sanitary inspector” under a set of community bylaws established by a council of seven chiefs and enforced by five Native police officers (Patterson 1982:129).

The missionaries were unable to take their program as far as they had hoped. The Nass was too far from the new center of the British Columbia economy to support the new industries. In any case, the mission colony model had become controversial as Duncan made one enemy after another. It was also very difficult to make the Nisga’a converts adhere to mission rules. Indeed, the missionaries’ reports are replete with frustrations as they failed to stamp out potlatching and other vestiges of Nisga’a custom. Over time the missionaries inevitably tempered their criticisms and compromised, albeit quietly. The missionary in charge at Kincolith, for example, allowed a substitute for the ceremonial raising of totem poles following the deaths of chiefs. By the early 1890s Christians had begun to hold feasts connected with the erection of marble tombstones a year or more after a death. The Reverend W. H. Collison recognized that the sponsors used these occasions not only to remember the dead but also to mix with non-Christian kin and to make a name for themselves in the community. Collison responded by holding church services concurrently with the ceremonies and inviting both traditionalists and Christians to a joint service the following Sunday. This proved so successful that he introduced a similar compromise with potlatchers, obtaining their permission to hold services in the lodges where the ceremonies took place. McCullagh adopted similar measures (Hawker 1991; Patterson 1982:110, 131). The missionaries saw these as temporary accommodations, but, as we shall see, they opened a door for a lasting synthesis of Christian and Nisga’a forms of ritual.

New converts often were zealous in their opposition to “heathen” customs, especially the potlatch. The early years of the Anglican mission were marked by a series of confrontations between the growing body of Christians at the mission colonies and the traditionalists remaining in the old villages; these were usually instigated by the Christians (Cole and Chaikin 1990:46–49; Gough 1984; Raunet 1984). It nevertheless proved hard to sustain the campaigns to stamp out non-Christian practices. Many Christians were enticed back into ceremonies and exchanges by their traditionalist kin. The period from the mid-1890s to McCullagh’s death in 1920 were marked by occasional revivals during which Christians confronted traditionalists or attacked indigenous rituals. The most significant of these revivals occurred in the winter of 1918–19. The previous winter much of Aiyansh, including McCullagh’s house, was washed out by a flood. Many of the villagers interpreted this disaster as a sign of God’s displeasure with their lack of Christian discipline and as a warning to abandon alcohol and avoid religious backsliding. They were invited by kin to relocate to their ancestral village of Gitlakdamix, now mainly Christian and with its own church. They made the move the following winter, determined to “adjure that which had so nearly been their spiritual undoing” (Moeran 1923:213). Kstiyawt, the owner of a pole, recalled to the anthropologist Marius Barbeau nine years later, “The people at one time had a fit . . . and chopped down the totem poles. They did not want anybody to keep them up. They cut down ours too. They later burnt them up” (Barbeau 1950:448). This was the final physical attack upon the old ways, but a residue of the opposition between “heathenism” and Christian remained. It can be detected in the decision by Paul Mercer, upon becoming the first Nisga’a priest in 1956, to give up his chiefly name, a move
praised by the church hierarchy (Caledonia Diocesan Times 1965). It may also account for the unease with which some elders greeted the decision to bring traditional regalia and art into church services in the 1970s.

As indigenous peoples resist or take up mission-inspired campaigns against “heathenism,” they are initiated into a “dialogue in which identity arises as cultural practices are reified” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Harkin 1993:2). The Anglicans attacked certain prominent indigenous practices, reifying them as “heathen religion.” In turn, those Nisga’a who insisted on potlatching and on participating in the secret societies probably “maintained (and in some ways invented) a strong sense of themselves and their ‘tradition’ in opposition to definitions imposed by the missionaries,” as did the Heiltsuk at Bella Bella (Harkin 1993:3). Ironically, the much reviled institution of the potlatch provided the basis for an indigenous synthesis of Christianity and Nisga’a tradition which was under way even before Collison and McCullagh had passed from the scene.

the confluence of traditions  A “full symbiosis between Protestantism and the traditional clan system” developed across the north coast of British Columbia in the early 20th century, nowhere more so than on the Nass River (Tennant 1990:78). There were three elements to this. The feast system through which Nisga’a transferred names and the rights to property provided the core. The missionaries vigorously opposed potlatching. They played a major role in convincing the federal government to ban potlatches in 1885 and then worked tirelessly at having the law applied (Cole and Caikin 1990). But the missionaries did not object to feasts organized by houses and clans in connection with funerals and the erection of tombstones a year or so later (known as stone moving, or settlement feasts). Stripped of obvious cultural trappings and incorporating church services, prayers, and brass bands, the feasts were in reality potlatches in which the hosts made “payments” to various individuals and groups (always including the church and its minister) who had contributed to the funerals (Tennant 1990:78). Nisga’a elders told me that at first the people were careful to keep the feasts small. When no one was arrested, these feasts grew in size and scope. Drucker (1958:147) notes that the Nisga’a were openly keeping detailed records of names called and gifts given at these feasts in the 1940s, when the potlatch was still illegal.

New voluntary community organizations formed the second element in this symbiosis. Missionaries had originally introduced voluntary organizations such as the village brass band and the Women’s Auxiliary to replace the winter feasts and ceremonials. As Hawthorn and his colleagues noted in the 1950s, the missionaries designed the clubs as means of acculturation, to acquaint the people with Western political offices and to give them a knowledge “of how to go about raising funds . . . and of how to run meetings” (Hawthorn et al. 1958:426). The clubs were thus in the first instance an extension of missionary discipline; this was reflected in the breakdown of the weekly village calendar into club activities. All the same, the clubs and feasting system became mutually supporting. They included the same people and often shared the same leaders. Club members often performed services for organizers of feasts. The YMCA, for instance, might volunteer to move a monument from the house of the deceased to the grave site for a family preparing a stone-moving feast and receive a public cash “payment” in the feast that followed. Clubs, in fact, came to receive a substantial part of their funds from the feasting system whether or not they participated directly. When an important person of either sex died, kinfolk would host a settlement feast and make contributions to the clubs to which the deceased had belonged. This continues today. As more cash has become available to the community, the contributions have become quite large. I was told, for example, that a total of more than Can $66,000 was contributed during a October 1994 settlement feast for an important chief in Greenville. As the man had been an ordained minister of the church, the Nass churches received more than Can $22,000. In this way, the village clubs became subservient to the chiefly descent
system: they provided witness and validation for the passing of Nisga’a names and offices. In return, the feast system subsidized local voluntary organizations.

The Church Army provided the third, and in several ways the most interesting, element of the symbiosis between Nisga’a culture and Protestantism. Collison and McCullagh introduced the Church Army to the Nass in the 1890s, to act as the evangelical arm of the local church and to stave off competition from more revivalist missions. Modeling their activities on those of the Salvation Army, members achieved ranks marked by special uniforms and duties, created their own bands, and held long and enthusiastic revival meetings through the valley and in neighboring Native villages. I have read and been told repeatedly that the Church Army comes closest to reflecting the spirit of the pre-Christian religion in its emotional tone, its music and color, its emphasis on spiritual healing (not at all unlike the Indian Shaker Church further south), and its domination of the winter season in the years before roads opened the Nass to the outside world (McCullum and McCullum 1975, 1979). There is a great deal of truth to this. The Nisga’a, like other Native groups in British Columbia, suffered immensely from the anomic that afflicted their entire community, marked by depression, alcoholism, suicide, and violence. Testifying at Church Army rallies provided villagers with a way to mend rifts within the community and to seek forgiveness and support—in short, to heal in the larger sense.

The Church Army organized “gospel trips” during the winter season. Probably originating in early campaigns to pagan villages organized by Christians at Aiyansh and Kincolith, they had become a regular part of the church year for all the Nisga’a villages by the 1920s. Through the fall and winter, when the river froze over and people were unable to get out to fish, each village’s Church Army planned an evangelical visit to one of its neighbors. The elders whom I interviewed in 1994 vividly remembered the enormous fun involved, especially when the visitors managed to catch the host village by surprise. The villagers shared food, gospel choruses, and testimonials into the small hours of the morning. Among other things, the best preachers reminded the people of their Nisga’a heritage and of the theft of their land.

The nature of the fit Nisga’a see between Christianity and tradition has shifted over the years to the point where today many see no conflict at all. The executive director of the Nisga’a Tribal Council, Rod Robinson, for example, has repeatedly stated that there is “no contradiction between ancient Nisga’a beliefs and contemporary Christianity. On the contrary, he points to parallels between the Bible and Ayuukhl Nisga’a [Nisga’a traditional law] and draws spiritual strength from both” (NTC 1993:8). Like many Melanesian Christians, the Nisga’a elders I have interviewed say that their ancestors already knew the true God before the arrival of the missionaries (see Barker 1990). They attribute earlier conflicts to missionary “misunderstandings.” Once replanted in indigenous soil, Christianity has come to be appreciated by many as sustaining tradition rather than attacking it from the outside.

**new sources of knowledge and power**  It is often pointed out, both in oral traditions and in historical texts, that Nisga’a themselves took the initiative of inviting missionaries into their communities (Patterson 1981). Given the context (a population ravaged by uncontrolled epidemics and increasing violence within and between communities), it can safely be assumed that the Nisga’a leaders were seeking a means of dealing with social collapse. But they could not have known enough of the missionaries to have anticipated their full impact on Nisga’a society. In general, missionary actions supported a general colonial policy of controlling the movement of Native people by restricting them to reserves and enforcing a regime of rapid acculturation. The missionaries nevertheless differed from the government in one major respect: they were not committed assimilationists, at least in the short term. McCullagh in particular pursued the goal of creating economically independent Native villages run by their own councils under their own rules (Patterson 1982:128). This stance led the missionaries to question
and, in some cases, to oppose the province’s confiscation of Nisga’a land. They saw this as unjust and as a threat to the future autonomy of Christianized Indians.

The Nisga’a had their own reasons to protest the province’s action, which had effectively made them prisoners in their own land, but they needed and welcomed the missionaries’ (often cautious) support. By writing letters protesting the provincial land policy to national and international newspapers and periodicals, the missionaries were able to bring public pressure to bear upon the province and some (extremely reluctant and inadequate) response to the Native claim. In the early days when few Nisga’a could speak English, missionaries served as translators before government commissions, thus permitting the Native voice to enter the official records from the beginning. Former Anglican missionary A. E. O’Meara worked as the lawyer for the Nisga’ Land Committee for almost 20 years, helping prepare briefs for the governments in Victoria and Ottawa, and contributing to the famous Nisga’a petition of 1913 (Patterson 1967). The efforts of the Nisga’a and O’Meara were supported by lobbies comprised mostly of Anglican Church members in British Columbia and Ontario. The missionaries were thus a help, but in the long term, through no fault of their own, their association with the land question became a liability. Provincial politicians denounced the Native protest as the work of missionary agitators unhappy with having the threat to their dominance over the Indians posed by the extension of Canadian law in the north. The charge eventually stuck. In 1927 the Canadian parliament amended the Indian Act to make any fund-raising for the purpose of pursuing land claims illegal, thus driving the Native land movement underground (Titley 1986).

These charges, although directed at the missionaries, rested on the racist assumption that before the coming of whites Indians had been primitives scratching a living off the land and thus incapable of either usefully exploiting the land or understanding legal ownership. In fact, the Nisga’a had abundant justification within their own aboriginal understandings and uses to claim ownership over the Nass, which they did with extraordinary eloquence and restraint at innumerable meetings with government officials. But the Nisga’a leaders were also quick to grasp the issues from opponents’ perspective and to turn this to their advantage. Here, again, the mission provided them with a critical resource: literacy. McCullagh laid great stress on education in Aiyansh and provided regular schooling for children and interested adults. The missionary gained fluency in Nisga’a early in his career. He invented an orthography that he used in translations of the Book of Common Prayer and the gospels, as well as in Hagaga: The Indian’s Own Newspaper, for which he bought a printing press. He trained a group of Native teachers, later known as “McCullagh’s men,” to read and write in English, Nisga’a, and Latin and to operate the printing press, all to assist the missionary in his work. The skills gained by the mission elite became an indispensable part of the Nisga’a political development. McCullagh’s most prominent student, Paul Mercer, often served as the secretary for the Nishga Land Committee, translating documents for the chiefs and taking minutes. He is included in a famous 1913 picture of the Land Committee (reproduced in NTC 1992).

Literacy reduced the possibility that missionaries would manipulate the land protest. The bilingual Hagaga was intended to encourage Nisga’a to learn English, but the Land Committee soon used it as a “vehicle for organizing the Land Movement in the region . . . to McCullagh’s discomfort” (Knight 1978:59). During the 1920s, the Nisga’a used the press to print notices warning would-be homesteaders to keep off Nisga’a land (Raunet 1984:132).

As the Nisga’a accepted and incorporated Christianity into their society, it in turn influenced their understanding of the land question. Church Army and lay preachers became familiar with biblical stories and passages that spoke to the Nisga’a plight, likening the Nisga’a, for example, to the ancient Israelites in exile from the promised land. The beautiful choruses sung at Church Army revivals likewise spoke to Nisga’a identity and to Nisga’a concerns. The Nisga’a crusade for justice gained a spiritual dimension that it still possesses. A speech given by Rod Robinson before the World Council of Churches captures this confluence nicely:

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Our history begins in the spirit world before the light of day. Our humanness derives from the act of creation and placement upon our traditional lands by God. Our land is indeed a holy land. Our identity is inseparable from our land. By definition, a Nisga'a [sic] does not exist in the fullness of his “being” without a complete melding of his land, language, laws, tribal system and spiritual values. [quoted in Hamel n.d.a]

When the federal government banned land claims activities, the local church provided a shelter within which Nisga’a continued to discuss and seek solutions to their dispossession. The Church Army’s gospel trips provided a particularly important venue for Nisga’a to interact with members of other villages (and so to reaffirm their tribal identity) and to hear stirring music and oratory, much of it associated directly and indirectly with the people’s relation to their land. The chiefs and “matriarchs” by this time had merged their traditional roles with church offices. Rod Robinson, who worked with Frank Calder, credits the Church Army with providing the foundation on which the Nisga’a Tribal Council was resurrected in 1955 (Rod Robinson, personal communication, November 4, 1994).

the creation of a new personal identity The Nisga’a response to colonialism, with its strong Christian overlay, represents what the Comaroffs call the “riposte of the colonized,” which was part of the “effort to fashion an awareness of, and gain conceptual mastery over, a changing world” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:258–259). Nisga’a awareness of the political situation resonated with Nisga’a individuals’ awareness of themselves, of their identity. On the one hand, the Nisga’a, like other northern groups, steadfastly resisted assimilation, not only into white society but also into neighboring Native groups. On the other hand, they quickly absorbed many of the everyday practices that made up the hegemonic underpinnings of Euro-Canadian culture and formed an intrinsic part of the missionary teaching and practice. Nisga’a leaders took pride in learning to be “civilized.” This sense of commonality with whites formed a part of their appeal for justice. Thus, chief Arthur Calder protested the theft of Nisga’a land with the following words in 1887:

We wish you to understand that we are not now like the old Indians: we understand better. We at Greenville are like the white people. We build houses and road like they do; we have firemen and bandsmen, and maps for our streets, which we bought ourselves. We are building a very nice church at Greenville, using our own money, with what help we get from the white people. [quoted in Patterson 1982:69]

Appeals to commonality, as well as the successes of the Nisga’a in the whites’ world when the opportunity arose, have since that time formed an essential part of the political message and of Nisga’a identity. Recent information pamphlets published by the Nisga’a Tribal Council unfailingly mention the fact that Nisga’a have become doctors, lawyers, and scientists, and Nisga’a clergy point out with pride that their communities paid for and built their modern churches with their own effort. In projecting an identity that balances tribal uniqueness with modern commonality, the Nisga’a provide one of many voices in officially “multicultural” Canada. But a generation ago, this kind of talk challenged the official state and school policies of assimilation and the cruel realities of racism and economic marginalization. The space allowed to Natives to shape their lives and find their place in the world was very narrow.

The Nisga’a who assumed leadership roles through the first half of this century almost without exception combined the possession of high-ranking names with prominent office in the local church. Ancestral names are not automatically inherited. In the case of senior and chiefly names in particular, would-be candidates are assessed by senior members of their houses and groomed for their future status. Further, they strengthen their names by their ability to work with people and guide them wisely. The women who led the Anglican Women’s Auxiliary or the Y.W.C.A. and the men who served as lay readers and Church Army captains are also remembered today as eloquent speakers, as chiefs and matriarchs, and as Land Committee participants. Although church activities have declined in the Nisga’a villages, I found in the course of researching the

tangled reconciliations  445
Nisga’a church that even younger people were aware of the roles (such as performing music, preaching, or translating English scriptures into Nisga’a) that elders had played in the church many years earlier. The settlement feasts for high-ranking elders inevitably reaffirm the connection between tradition and Christianity through speeches made in memory of the deceased and in the large disbursements of money to the village churches, the Church Army, the Anglican Church Women, and other Christian organizations. Merging Christian and traditional traits, the elders exemplify the reconciliation of the “often oppositional facets of identity” (White 1991:236). It is this, I suspect, that makes them inspirational even to younger Nisga’a with little personal interest in the church.21

The Nisga’a leaders who welcomed new Anglican priests into the Nass villages in the late 1960s held important offices in the local church, as had their parents. Respected by the community, they greatly eased the acceptance of the new clergy and played an important role in defining the place of the latter within the community, as we saw in the previous section. The increasing involvement of the national church in the debate over aboriginal rights, which had motivated a recommitment to the Nass churches, thus rejoined a vernacular religion in which local church office had long become fused with the feast system and the land issue. Taken together, these two distinct developments account for the efflorescence of the Anglican Church among the Nisga’a in the late 20th century.

conclusion

Contemporary studies of religious synthesis, or “syncretism,” in indigenous societies are shaped in large part within regional traditions of religious scholarship. It is difficult to write of Christianity in Melanesia without reference to studies of “cargo cults,” or to write of African churches without taking up issues first defined in the study of independent churches (Stewart and Shaw 1994:13–14). I began this article with the observation that studies of Christianity among the aboriginal peoples of the Canadian northwest coast have focused almost exclusively upon the missionary encounter, particularly during the initial stages of missionization in the 19th century. Discussions have tended to focus on the figure of the missionaries themselves, even as historians and ethnohistorians place increasing emphasis upon indigenous agency. Scholars have been interested in the nature of missionary complicity in the long-lasting national project to assimilate Native cultures while leaving them on the economic and political margins of Canadian society. In what ways, if any, did different missionaries offer variations or alternatives to this project? How did Christian ideas and institutions affect Native people’s sense of their own identity and their political struggle against assimilation? In what ways were First Nations converts able to remold Christianity to their own cultural orientations and political aspirations?

These are clearly crucial questions. But the singular focus on the interactions between missionary and aboriginal, as with other regional ethnographic traditions, draws our attention to some problems at the expense of others. Scholars have given virtually no attention to those situations and periods of religious change in which Euro-Canadian missionaries played peripheral roles. It is difficult to find any serious consideration, to take two examples, of the role played by Native evangelists in the spread of Christianity on the northwest coast in the past (and today in the case of Pentecostal movements) or of the significance of Christian voluntary organizations in coastal villages. Yet it is exactly in these kinds of areas that First Nations people were most able to stamp their own concerns and orientations on Christianity: to create a “vernacular” expression of the religion. No less important, an obsession with the missionary encounter draws scholarly attention away from the contemporary situation. The old mission churches continue to exist in many First Nations communities, but their roles have become increasingly ambiguous, limited, and contradictory. While shaped in the shadow of the missionary encounter of a century
ago, their presence cannot be understood as a mere continuation of the original missionary-indigenous dialogue and conflict. The social and political contexts have changed too much.

In this article I have deliberately accentuated the discontinuities in the relationship between the Anglican Church and the Nisg'aa by dealing with the contemporary situation before turning to the missionary roots of the church. The clergy who settled in the Nass villages in the late 1960s marked a new development in which, at the behest of Nisg'aa leaders, Anglican clergy took a prominent and activist supporting role in the long-standing struggle for aboriginal rights. The entry of the clergy, in turn, reflected an ideological shift in the national church, specifically a rejection of the assimilationist project and the role played by missionaries in that project. The ideological motivation for church renewal on the part of the Anglican hierarchy, then, had nothing to do with the development of vernacular expressions of Christianity in Native communities like the Nisg'aa. All the same, the Nisg'aa had developed their own understandings and uses of Christianity during the long period of church neglect. They literally adopted the newly arrived Anglican clergy into a localized, vernacular expression of Christianity. The present-day Anglican Church in the Nass valley thus reflects a historical merging of two efforts at reconciliation: an ideologically driven attempt to atone for the sins of the past and a longer, locally developed synthesis of Anglican Christianity and Nisg'aa cultural and political institutions. This merging, in turn, continues to be shaped in the larger context of the Nisg'aa drive for a land settlement and for a form of self-government.

Few serious scholars today believe that “syncretism,” the combining of elements from different religious traditions, can be understood as a unidirectional process of change toward or away from a dominant religion. Rather, what one witnesses in situations of Christian conversion, for example, is a “politics of religious synthesis” shaped not only by the internal themes of religious traditions but by local, regional, and global developments that may all have an impact on local concerns and understandings (Stewart and Shaw 1994). The Anglican Church among the Nisg'aa cannot be adequately understood either as a survival of the missionary period or as a vernacular expression. Instead, the present-day Anglican Church in the Nass, like many other contemporary examples of religious synthesis, must be “construed as the result of the interaction of ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ as reticulations of local culture and global influences” (Kempf 1994:123).

notes

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1. Elsewhere I have written on the erasure of Christianity in ethnographic accounts of contemporary Melanesian societies (Barker 1992).

2. I draw heavily here on Anglican Church of Canada 1993 for this section. See also Grant 1984, Hendry 1969, and McCullum and McCullum 1975. Although writing for a Roman Catholic audience, Goulet and Peelman (1983) express many of the ideals driving the Anglican reforms even if in a passionate prose not characteristic of Anglican writings.

3. This is true for Native Anglicans as much as for white activists; see, for example, Tait 1991.
4. For example, they have done this in support of Native resistance to megaprojects such as the James Bay and Great Whale hydroelectric projects in northern Quebec and the Mackenzie pipeline proposal of the early 1970s. A full listing of synod resolutions concerning First Nations was included as appendix 3 of a brief prepared by the Anglican Church of Canada and submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1993.

5. One of the key organizers of these annual events, the Reverend J. A. Mackenzie, later moved to the Diocese of Caledonia and remains very active in the Nisga’a community.

6. Financial stringency and infighting have led the main office to place restraints on several local initiatives. An innovative program for training Native clergy in British Columbia has had problems securing approval and funding from Toronto because the church already supports a school for Native clergy in Manitoba. Space does not permit me to examine initiatives at the provincial and diocesan levels, but it is worth noting that in 1995 alone the Diocese of Caledonia faced more than a 30 percent decrease in its already meager budget (John Hannen, personal communication, September 26, 1994). Ongoing financial crises do tend to increase conflict between different interest groups and to stifle innovation.

7. The phrase, repeated in most public statements made by Nisga’a leaders about their lands, comes from the famous Nisga’a Petition of 1913 to the Privy Council of the British House of Lords. A copy of the full text, as well as a photography of the original members of the Nisga’ and the Nisga’ School Committee, can be found in NTC 1993.

8. The others are Haida, Tsimshian, Gitksan, and Carrier.

9. An outsider is considered adopted when she or he is given a Nisga’a name by senior members of one of the 65 matrilineal descent groups (wilp, “house”), the traditional owners of property (land, titles, and traditions). As in other northern cultures, the houses are further organized into four exogamous “clans” (poxq). Nisga’a names denote the house membership and the social standing of their holders. I take up the significance of such adoptions below. For more information on Nisga’a social and political structures, see Inglis et al. 1990 and McNeary 1976.

10. An excerpt gives some of the flavor of the sermon:

So for us, the settlement of our land claims is not a political question. It is not about economic development. It is a religious question. It is about who we are. It is about our relationship with God. It is about our right to carry out the stewardship that God has given us for this valley, our language, our culture, our Christian values, our children, our grandparents. If we are to (be) whole and strong people we need to live as God calls, respecting and caring for God’s creation, sharing generously with all God’s people, native and white, of all that God has given us. [Hannen n.d.]

11. The best study of Native politics in British Columbia, including a good overview of the Nisga’a role and influence, is Paul Tennant’s Aboriginal Peoples and Politics (1990). Raunet (1984) provides a more detailed account of the Nisga’a experience, while Patterson (1983) outlines the origins of the land claims movement on the lower Nass.

12. Wilp Wilxox?l Nisga’a opened its doors in September 1995, offering a variety of undergraduate courses and its own degree program in Nisga’a studies. It currently operates in affiliation with the new University of Northern British Columbia.

13. For some years the diocese had supported a relatively large ministry to Indians working at the canneries of Port Edward, outside Prince Rupert. John Blyth was actually adopted by a high-ranking Nisga’a woman in Port Edward before departing for Aiyansh where, in a fitting gesture of reciprocity, he was ordained a priest by the bishop.

14. Much of the information in this and succeeding paragraphs derives from interviews with Blyth, Hannen, and Retter. See also McCullum and McCullum (1979), who provide an interesting description of the church in the Nass during the late 1970s.

15. John Blyth (personal communication, July 14, 1992) recalls that Pierre Trudeau granted an audience only at the last minute, when the delegation was preparing to depart from Ottawa. The prime minister was interrupted at the start of the meeting by one of the Nisga’a leaders, who insisted that their priest begin with a prayer.

16. Since a road was completed to the Nass valley in the late 1950s, the Nisga’a have had to endure the sight of trucks, often working around the clock, hauling logs out of the traditional territory. The Nisga’a are demanding some compensation for the billions of dollars of resources that have been stripped from their lands over the years.

17. Other members of the consortium include the United Church of Canada, the Charles Cook Theological School in Arizona, and the Vancouver School of Theology. Since its founding in 1985, the consortium has initiated the Native Ministries Summer School and supported a theological training center for lay ministers and a Native ministries degree program, both offering extension courses. The summer school attracts indigenous participants from British Columbia, parts of the United States, and the South Pacific. Nisga’a teachers have provided some of the courses.

18. As men, the Anglican clergy could not pass the names to their own children in any case.

19. Compare this to Inglis et al.: “Although there was no lack of conflict, the villages were organized units in which the aboriginal kinship and political systems and white-influenced institutions and organizations fit together in a community structure” (1990:285).

20. This is the preferred Nisga’a translation for women holding senior clan names and positions.

21. A young Nisga’a man who had told me that he wished the Anglican Church would “just leave us alone” went on to speak of the spiritual inspiration that he had received from a recently deceased elder.
Remembered at a huge stone-moving feast, that elder had been president of the Anglican Church Women and had been one of the pillars of the local church, as well as supremely knowledgeable about Nisg̱a’a traditions.

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