EARLE WAUGH, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The "Flemish" character of Rogier Vandersteene's view of the Cree

1. *Background*

It seems clear that North America has always been peopled by migrants.[1] If current information is substantially correct, both North and South America served as end points for successive migrations that reach back more than 15,000 years. Judging by Canada's experience during the last hundred years, every successive wave of migrants brought powerful ideas for shaping and redefining life in the new country; they reformulated the environment in place in some way, to make it more like their original home or to make things conform more to their perceived cultural norm. If so, notions of assimilation and colonialism have a far longer genealogy than previously believed. One can only imagine the conflicts that must have arisen in the process of the integration of these migrations. Most startlingly, one has to conclude that Foucault's concept of Other has been with us from the beginning of this hemisphere's settlement.[2]

I offer here one case where a new factor entered into the dialogue, the mixture of social effects of immigration, namely missionary work among the Indians in Canada. In particular, I wish to discuss the outlook brought to this task by Rogier[3] Vandersteene, a colourful Oblate missionary who worked among the Cree from 1946 until his death in 1976, and who came with ideas about culture and language that derived from his experience in Flanders. Vandersteene was part of a powerful force that has immigrated into Canada, namely the Catholic Church, and it could be argued that the Cree people he came to were relatively isolated and self contained, culturally and linguistically. What elements of linguistic belonging did he see as applicable to this Canadian society?

I shall examine two questions which are relevant not only to the Cree but also to Flanders, and which form part of Vandersteene's Flemish experience that he brought with him. These features are firstly the relation of language to identity, and secondly the shape of identity and cultural history. He offers an especially interesting case because he represents an individual whose views are diametrically opposed to those of the hegemonic European who is bent on conquering the New World. He struggled with his own legacy, and used it in a careful and restrained manner. Hence it is worth while examining the factors at play, in both language and ethnic identity, brought by this influential migrant to Canada. I shall then examine his ideas of "decolonizing" the Cree, before drawing some conclusions about contributions he might make to our

understanding of Canadian culture. But first I will give some account of his life and career.[4]

Rogier Vandersteene O.M.I. was a colourful and dedicated priest who served with the Oblates in several Cree settlements in northern Alberta from 1947 to 1976. He was born in Marke in Flanders on July 15, 1918. He was the eldest son of the thirteen children of Adolf George and Julia Vandersteene, but his father did not want him to enter the priesthood, as the eldest sons were often expected to do in that area of Flanders. During his youth he was a strong defendant of Flemish nationalism, and until his death he attached an insignia to all his correspondence indicating his loyalty to Flanders. He was extremely sensitive to Flemish linguistic claims, and believed Flemish religious nationalists should work for the good of their fellow-Flemish against the French-speaking majority in Belgium, even to the detriment of the latter.

He trained locally for the priesthood and took his vows on July 11, 1943. He applied for the toughest and poorest of the Oblate missions, notably those among the Inuit in Canada's Arctic, but he was sent to Alberta. He served in Wabasca from 1946 to 1949 and in Little Red River and Fort Vermilion from 1949 to 1953. In 1955 he published *Wabasca*, a book based on his early experience among the Cree; the book was popular in Belgium and was translated into French. In it he described the ceremony of the *wikkokkewin*, which inducted the spirit of the recently deceased into the other world and welcomed the spirit ancestors of the tribe to a winter celebration in their honour. This ceremony became the basis for a revised Catholic mass incorporating many Cree emblems. In his native Flanders he became something of a folk hero, while Canadians at many levels of society honoured or criticized his work. He showed his sympathies early in his career, when a fellow priest broke an old man's sacred pipe as a sign of disgust and rejection of his traditions; Vandersteene fixed the pipe and returned it to its owner. Before he died, the old man ritually transferred the pipe to him. The incident changed not only his thinking but his career. He began to involve himself in activities related to native healing practices, such as transferring Indian healing plants to his home and nurturing them in his greenhouses.

He returned to Wabasca and stayed there until 1956. In 1957 he was assigned to Trout Lake, where he remained until 1968. The Cree mothers of Trout Lake had confidence that his prayers and his vow to build a grotto to the Virgin Mary at Trout Lake prevented an epidemic among the children of that remote northern village, and some Cree medicine men so trusted him that they began passing on secret medical lore to him. At the same time the Bishop urged him to go to Grouard to act as overseer of the missions and develop a Cree missions policy. After five years he asked to be returned to mission work, and he was sent to the remote settlements of Jean D'Or Prairie, Fox Lake and Garden River, at the southwestern edge of Wood Buffalo National Park. In 1975 he learned from the Cross Cancer Clinic in Edmonton that he had pulmonary cancer. Following the preliminary treatments he returned to his duties. He sought out and was treated by two medicine men, but he died in Slave Lake of an asthmatic attack on August 7, 1976. He was interred in the Oblate section of the Girouxville cemetery after both Indian and Church burial ceremonies.

2. *Language and identity*

Vandersteene was heavily influenced by the Flemish nationalist movement. We will see how his attitude toward the Cree language was moulded in that crucible: "A Fleming understands better than anybody that the language of a people is its main artery," he contended.[5] It may be instructive to summarize some of the movement's main directions. It arose in part from the fact that Flemish speakers were a minority in their own country and the administration seemed to despise any language but French. Vandersteene grew up in the shadow of this conflict, once incurring the wrath of his school principal when he refused to wave the Belgian flag for visiting dignitaries because the national government was dominated by French-speakers little concerned about Flemish language rights. Many are the stories told during the First World War of Flemish-speaking soldiers under the command of French-speaking officers who either could not or would not acknowledge the language of the soldiers in communicating with them, with tragic consequences. Following the war, Flemish nationalism gained new strength, spurred on by stories of discrimination in the army and the government. The outraged cry of the soldiers and other Flemish nationalists found expression in a text scratched on a stone by an unknown soldier: "Here our blood / When our rights?" Similar sentiments are expressed in a poem by the nationalist priest Father Cyriel Verschaeve (I translate):

> Here their bodies lie as seeds in the sand,
> Hope in the harvest, O Flanderland.

Such nationalist emotions were not new. Long before the First World War, Albrecht Rodenbach was a key figure at the origin of the Flemish Movement. He was considered a young radical in 1875 when he formed the Blauwvoeterij or Stormy Petrel Movement, a loose organization of students dedicated to Flemish independence. His poem "Flies the petrel, storm at sea"[6] became the rallying cry of young Flemish nationalists from that time on. The sentiments of the poem are that the Flemish people, symbolized by the seagull, will rise above the storm, survive and thrive. On Rodenbach's statue is the following inscription:

> Uit houwe trouwe wordt moereland herboren
> En Vlaanderen's sonne is aan het daghen.
> [Out of strong fidelity our motherland is being reborn
> And the sun of Flanders is rising.]

From such sentiments grew the Flemish linguistic and nationalist movement.

When Vandersteene came to Grouard, he immediately plunged into the study of the Cree language. His partner in this process was a young priest from Quebec, Louis-Paul Lachance, but there was never any competition between them. Hour after hour he toiled over the language, never even stopping when he went out hunting. As he recalled later, he found it helpful to write Cree words on pieces of paper and place them on the gunsight, then he forced himself to say the word several times before he fired a shot. He pursued Cree relentlessly, like a besotted lover; it became a constant source of delight and consternation to him, till the end of his life. His skills increased so rapidly that local Crees marvelled at him, and Lachance despaired and abandoned the field. So competent did he become that

people who did not know him by name, and even some parishioners, referred to him by the epithet *ka nihta nehiyawet*, "the person who really speaks Cree."

Despite many reverses, his success with Cree sustained him, along with his inner convictions about his calling. Vandersteene did not like to fail; he never had, even when he was very ill. His love for Cree grew along with his pursuit of an underlying Cree character. He was beguiled by the stories of elders, their powers and their ideas; he was sure something entirely Cree lay beneath the facade of the complex culture he found himself in. His experience of the Flemish language and its cultural significance, he felt, gave him an insight into the Cree people. He was entranced by the way Cree could give an instant photograph of a situation; he liked the ease with which new words could be formed, just by connecting elements of meanings together. In his meetings with colleagues he could wax eloquent about the treasures of the Cree language. He pressed academics to study Cree for its possible relationship to German and Dutch.

In 1971 he attended a conference in Winnipeg on Cree syllabics. His remarks there sum up the attitude he formed early on towards Cree:

> Cree is a beautiful language that should not be allowed to die. It is spoken, in several dialects, nearly clear across Canada and in parts of the United States. It belongs to the Algonquin family of languages. ...
> Missionaries and traders who learned it themselves and taught it to the people were doing a very wise thing. English or French taught in schools were often forgotten quickly by the native children when they returned to their communities, and those who did not forget completely did not further develop. Their reading consisted mostly in comic strips. ...
> Many books and articles were printed and still are reprinted in syllabics in Cree, Montagnais and Eskimo, mostly of a religious nature. Lately, however, the state took over all education in all its ramifications and native languages started to suffer. No more Cree in schools. It has been banished locally, even from recess periods and recreational halls, and propaganda is being made to have the children speak more English at home, even when parents do not understand it. A painful spiritual poverty of the children is the result of such actions. The authority of the parents is broken, respect for their own history and culture is replaced by a false sense of superiority. Mature people and children are alienated, to the detriment of both. Undigested ideas make an unreal and unrealistic atmosphere in which dissatisfaction and frustration abound.
> Reaction to this situation is coming from both the people

themselves and from wiser men in school administration, Church and government. There is a movement of return to the native languages among educated Indians. There is still the attitude among some officials that Crees can speak and write their language and be considered illiterate! The ideal we should aim for is that with our fellow Canadians we could communicate in an official language, spoken or written,while at the same time we should be so rich (and helped to be that rich!) as to learn the tongue of our community - reading and writing as well as in speech. In any case, your own language, studied, spoken, written and read, is still the very best starting point to learn to speak, write and read another one, official or not. We do some splendid research on the origins of our planet, up to going to the moon, that may teach us something of our own earth-genesis, up to digging up old bones buried for eons,but all that is only "body;" we try to neglect our past, the spiritual development, the viewpoint of other notions concerning our inner growth and being, and we even try to destroy what is not spiritually "me now." Is humanity only as rich as we are? Or are we afraid of discovering things that may upset us from our self-created pinnacle of our *arche [sic] de triomphe*? Many truths can only be facets of one truth, and many truths are enthroned in many languages, that come through centuries of wisdom, thought, experience ... and kept alive and brought to us today. We must not destroy it. Humanity will never be one because one language is spoken! Look at those who speak English. Are they one? If unity has to be bought at the price of linguistic poverty and limitation, that unity is offensive and evil. Humanity has to be diversified, with diverse approaches, diverse expressions, because humanity is too big for one pair of eyes, one pair of ears, one set of brains and one language to express it.[7]

What can be concluded from this profession of faith? It reflects an individual who interpreted the Cree language as he interpreted the norms and ideological controversies of French-Flemish rivalry. He comprehended its value as an extension of his own loyalty to the Flemish language. In his opinion, Cree was completely undervalued, misrepresented and ignored by the majority debates on French and English, and he felt the same sense of outrage as he did at the treatment of Flemish in Belgium. His commitment to Cree, then, was not just a question of learning the language in order to communicate. It was to re-establish the Cree language in its important position in

North American history and culture, and to give it its rightful place in the development of Canadian identity.

3. *The shape of cultural history and identity*

Belgium is a recent country by European standards, having come into existence only in 1830. Within this new country, both Flemish and Walloon (French-speaking) identities were intended to be integral to the whole. August Vermeylen, the modernist and nationalist writer, put the Flemish case clearly: "In order to be something, we must be Flemings; we want to be Flemings in order to be Europeans."[8] In this way the Flemish were supposed to feel connected to French-speaking fellow-Belgians by religion and liberal perceptions of government. Unfortunately the Walloons tended to look down on the Flemings as uncultured.

However, Flemish national awareness flowered in the arts and literature; it developed particularly strongly after 1860 when Guido Gezelle (1830-99) published his first poems. As a young student, Vandersteene especially looked to Gezelle as one of his models. With Gezelle the close relationship among literary expression, religion and nationalism came to the fore. It is a trait that touched many writers both inside and outside the nationalist movement.

Of all the regions of Flanders famous for its missionaries, the area around Marke has a special significance. Scores of priests and missionaries came from there, partly because of the forward-looking bishops who sponsored a college for training priests, partly because of a connection between Flemish nationalism and Catholic piety. The link was echoed by Vandersteene when he addressed the local congregation on his return from the Canadian mission field on his first furlough: "I serve my country by going on this mission."

One regrettable fact that we cannot gloss over is that Vandersteene shared the pro-Nazi sympathies of some of the Flemish nationalists. He became more and more involved with the pro-German student movement that flourished between the two World Wars, and his faith in Germany continued throughout the Second, since he saw no way for the Flemish to receive fair treatment under Walloon hegemony. It was the policy of the Church to keep French-speaking Oblates in Belgium but to encourage the Flemish-speaking priests to move elsewhere, and he realized that his loyalty to Flemish nationalism was working against any long-term service to his beloved Flanders in the Church.

Activist politics fitted his temperament. He relished the resistance of people like his father, who was firmly opposed to him. He thrived in that environment, but it would prove to have a bitter aftertaste. In 1940 his brother Étienne was called up to be sent to France to fight against the German army. He refused to go, and this was interpreted to mean that he was a collaborator. After the Allied victory, the collaborators were hounded on every front and Étienne ended up in jail. Suddenly everyone claimed to have been in the resistance, but not Vandersteene and his friends, many of whom were jailed as well.

He took these events in stride and began working with those who were accused of collaboration, sometimes in ways that could have led to his own imprisonment. One day he appeared in court on behalf of some of his accused friends. When the court case

was over, Vandersteene hurried from the building, forgetting his black satchel. A court official ran after him: "Father, Father, you've forgotten your bag." Luckily the official did not look inside: there were fifteen false passports in it. Once he dressed a woman as a priest in order to get her through a security checkpoint, but he realized when they were almost there that she was wearing rings. Quickly he signalled to her to cover her hands, and they passed through without difficulty. At other times he represented himself as an ordinary citizen who wanted to visit collaborators in prison so he could taunt them; in reality he brought them food. He also hid people in his room when the building was being searched. One day he barred the doorway of an artist's house when it was besieged by irate anti-collaborators. "Over my dead body!" he said, staring them down. Vandersteene's pro-Nazism was a source of concern to his family and friends. They feared for his safety, and given the public mood immediately after the liberation, they anticipated that he would run afoul of the government with his well-known support of those accused of collaboration.

That he was willing to go so far in his loyalty to Flemish nationalism (as he interpreted it) has be kept in mind when we consider his work in Canada. He brought this same intensity to the Cree position in Canada, and tended to see Cree culture in much the same way as radical Flemish nationalists viewed Flemish culture, that is, as the original Celtic culture of antiquity destroyed by imperialism. At the heart of the situation in Canada, he felt, was the similar "colonial" vision of the white Euro-Canadian, a "seeing" based on a reductionist attitude toward Indian culture and religion:

> But sometimes, we saw a thing (from another culture) and we hid behind a set of symbols in our heads and instead of saying, "The set of symbols that others have, there's truth in there," no, we went on with our own symbol and we smashed theirs. When we smashed the symbol, we smashed what was inside too, in this case, the practice of the Indian religion. Now we can't find anything among young Indians, because we disregarded the bases of his [sic] life. For their sense of wrong-doing, even their sense of what was fun, differed from ours.Now they just don't believe in anything ...[9]

Thus Vandersteene came to the conclusion that speaking Cree was not just a way of reacting to the world and creating identity: he also saw how the Cree could use it as a force to create an alternative world to the white Canadian one. The old Cree people consciously used language to help create and maintain a different cultural world. The more he learned, the more he realized how distinctive Cree culture was.

> Cree people talk differently than whites. Like the problem of committing themselves. Cree never will lie because they have seven or eight different words to express doubt. If someone comes and I say "Are we going to hunt tomorrow?" he would say "Enh enh ahpo ituke," that

> means, "It's possible." But what if tomorrow his wife is sick. He didn't want to commit himself to me to hunt because then he would have lied to me if his wife was sick. An Indian was an RCMP officer and he said he would be in on such and such a day and he never showed up. They said he was a liar. He should have used maybe. All this applies to things like asking people their names, knocking on doors, entertaining people, property, etc.[10]

Obviously these protocols apply to a wide range of experience. Vandersteene learned that asking for anything from a Cree standpoint required him to preserve the independence of the person he was asking. To ask someone directly did not allow the other person the freedom to say no. He discovered that if he could send someone to ask for him, he could respect the other's independence. He also learned that there were ways that you could make requests when you were alone with someone, but they required certain positional stances. For example, if he wanted a cigarette he could say "Smoking a cigarette would be a very pleasant thing to do with you now."

Mindful of the relationship between Flemish and French culture, he read much into Cree language habits. Even in ordinary conversation, the Cree had a different conception of power. Thus when a Cree had to thank someone, he (or she) was admitting the other person was in a very real sense superior to him. Requesting something put him in debt to that person. However, if he offered, then the requester was not indebted. Eventually Vandersteene understood why relations between the various governments and the Cree continued to be so troubled: the government cultivated the notion that the Cree had to express thanks for the funds it allocated to them, despite the fact that they had owned the land before the whites came. From the Cree perspective there could be no equality when one group must always be grateful to the other.

The same principles are at work in the well-known protocols of hospitality and sharing. Vandersteene learned one of his most important lessons as a result of his naïveté. Once at Wabasca he stopped to see an old Indian called Charlebois. He soon realized Charlebois didn't have very much food to share with him and was making no great attempt to do so. From a Cree standpoint, Charlebois really didn't take good care of his "brother" at all. Vandersteene shrugged it off. The next morning he went on his way, and a few miles down the trail he saw a moose. He tracked and killed it, cut a few pieces from the carcass, and brought them back to Charlebois' wife. Then he and Charlebois brought the moose meat back to the cabin and feasted. Not for a day or two did Vandersteene set out for Trout Lake. The Cree who heard of this thought it a great joke. In Cree tradition old Charlebois should have fed the priest, even with the little he had, and instead Vandersteene ended up doing the sharing. The Cree relished the irony in the story. Vandersteene thought he was merely practising Christian charity; only later did he learn how he had given a new twist to the Cree value of sharing.

What is also important is that Vandersteene was in a minority position in

multiple ways. Firstly he was a European in Cree society - thus old Charlebois was treating him like an outsider, an Other. Then there was his minority position within Canada as a missionary to the minority aboriginal group, and as a Catholic in the largely Protestant population of western Canada. He had also been a minority Flemish-speaker within Belgium, revolting in his youth against the slights dealt to the Flemish-speakers by the French. Finally he was a priest, an elite celibate minority within the family-oriented structure of Western society. In one way or another he experienced, incorporated and reacted to all these elements of Otherness in his life and career.

It is striking that Canada's emphasis on multiculturalism also contributes to this phenomenon: on the surface the immigrant is welcomed for the contribution he can make, but really he is forever hyphenated. Nor, strangely, is he comfortable in his old home. He may be considered as Canadian as anyone else, but that very Canadian-ness divides him from his old home as surely as from his new one, or as it divided Vandersteene from the Cree.

His sense of being in a minority played a key role in his perception of the Cree, both in regard to his efforts to become one with them and his sensitivity to their minority situation. His attempt to bridge the gap between Canada's first people and Euro-Canadians was a religious project that took him to the heart of a moral dilemma: Canadian "colonialism" leaves Euro-Canadians without moral authority to construct the country. Worse still, perhaps, it leaves aboriginal people without a commitment to the current nature of Canada. He saw Cree culture as the foundation of Canadian cultural identity, antecedent to both the French and English cultural traditions.

A very clear example of his application of these ideas is his concept of the faithful remnant, which is left to form a new and holy community after a disaster. Originally his goal had been to form a meditation group, based on the notion of a tightly knit order dedicated to certain forms of piety and prayer, much like a Euroopean monastic order. It floundered, surviving only for two years. He made his next attempt in the tiny community of Trout Lake. By his second year there, he could write: "I'm beginning to have a small nucleus of faithful at weekly Mass and Communion; very small, but I hope, very firm. One day, God knows, it will explode. I nourish this nucleus as a mother feeds her babe."[11]

Vandersteene soon learned that most Cree communities were fundamentally splintered in their culture and their religion. He was also aware that there were simply not enough missionaries to be present in all the communities. He therefore proposed the idea of a remnant. The full-blown idea seems to have come to him first as a result of a Pentecostal mission to his little Church in Trout Lake, which left him with only a handful of people. Originally it was his idea that the aged leaders from each community who had stood the test of time, and represented the traditional wisdom and leadership, best fit the description of this category of leadership. He writes:

> We must try to discover a nucleus of Christianity, a truly religious nucleus: those who are truly Christian. That will demand in some places

> one year, in other places more than one year. It all depends how deep missionary fervour has penetrated. This second phase will especially be a time of the bringing of the word in catechism and liturgy of a purer and more intensive nature. We will see who drifts to the top under the influence of this more intensive and purified evangelization.[12]

He was convinced that the remnant must be taught to understand the passion of Christ, because that commitment to sacrifice was the example for all Christian leaders. He stressed the use of the Cree word *tutakawiyak*, which means "to be treated exactly like," that is, the leaders will not only be persecuted, they will be treated exactly like Christ. Thus the remnant must be fully aware of the spiritual nature of the enterprise. He emphasized Cree parables; the vexatious temptations of Christ which could befall all leaders; and the beatitude of the Father, who, he affirms, "est une maman! Ma maman, mais mieux encore." They must be taught that Cree culture was given for Cree people, and that Cree cultural concepts, like the belief that remembering a spirit or ancestor makes him or her actually present, must be valued as a way for the remnant to carry on without the white missionaries. He advocated identifying and selecting two or three people from each community who would lead this remnant, providing a nucleus around which both the Church and the community could achieve some sense of wholeness and blessing. These leaders, a "council of elders," would be brought together for intensive training during the summer, so that the meaning of the Church could be developed from within their consciousness. In this manner, a truly Cree-based Church would arise to enrich all the Church in Canada, and indeed Canadian society as a whole. This was the message he carried from group to group, as he said, "from one end of Cree country to the other, about the same distance as Spain to Moscow."

These ideas echo Vandersteene's notions of the culture of the Flemish people. He and his friends had agitated for a Flemish identity and a Flemish clergy for Flanders. They had followed the model of Rodenbach's First World War student associations, which had political goals, especially concerning language and cultural rights for Flemish-speaking people. He had become a leader in the KSA, the Catholic Student Action group, a religiously oriented association lobbying for Flemish language and culture. Part of this movement was decidedly critical of the Church hierarchy.

During the inter-war years, the Catholic hierarchy had treated the nationalism of Flemish youth with restrained disdain. They regarded these nationalist urgings as activities threatening to the security of the state, and destructive for the Catholic party, which had the overwhelming support of the hierarchy. Moreover, as part of the favoured group, the French-speaking priesthood was not about to correct the demographic imbalance in their ranks; the hierarchy did little to spur opportunities for Flemings, knowing the advanced education required and the socio-economic class to which most Flemish-speaking people belonged. In short, the Flemish people were considered too poor and too poorly educated to be able to meet the demands of the priesthood. This

was a kind of post-colonial ideology before it became recognized as such.

4. *Decolonizing the Cree*

It is largely because of this kind of discrimination within the Church that Vandersteene refused to stay at home and become a priest in a Flemish-speaking parish, although his family pleaded with him to do so. While he could conceive of himself as a loyal son of the transcendent Church, he could not accept the political subservience forced upon its Flemish-speaking wing. He carried into Canada this same distinction between the Church as God's vehicle for salvation and the Church as a hierarchical organization. There is good evidence that he saw the position of the Cree in Canada in the same light as he viewed that of the Flemish people while he was growing up. For example, he was highly critical of the Canadian Church for its complicity in the problems among the Cree. Outsiders wondered whether he represented a fifth column within the Church. In conferences and press statements he appeared to argue that the Church had largely failed the people among whom he laboured. He saw its *raison d'être* defeated by its own cultural underpinnings. In his mature analysis he began by reviewing what the Church had done in North America. As early as 1965 he was warning his colleagues: "Don't read any more of those American Indian books, and put away all those mission books that tell you how to convert the Indian."[13] He saw that, while the Church had been a strong force for good, some very destructive effects came about because of her presence. This was so because the Church had seen herself as an instrument not only of evangelism but also of civilization:

> Churches were not only becoming power structures, they were also part of a colonizing heavier structure. In Europe religious division followed the cracks of state borders in a development not of conviction but of convenience. Nationality and religion were officially one, persecution was a state affair, conversion was treason, state, language and religion spread together and grew powerful or weak together ... Most missionaries who came ... were inhibited by that view.[14]

The school was a perfect tool for this kind of Church, since it provided a means for both conversion and European civilization. That development encouraged the coming of whites, who as bearers of the favoured civilization consistently pushed the Indians to the edge of the community and, in some cases, of the church's concern.The Church authorities became "pawns in a game," till eventually they looked on a few hours of catechism during school hours as an achievement, when it was in fact "pathetic." Moreover, the Church became, sometimes unwittingly, the tool for all kinds of European destruction: treaties which split communities between treaty and non-treaty, language which deliberately undermined confidence in the traditional tongues, a lifestyle that favoured the swelling ranks of technically trained whites, and schools that enforced and maintained government policy for the sake of the funding involved. The mission church, with her focus on the local people, gave way to "national" concerns, becoming a Church with a "national" message. The Indian became the

"neglected" minority. The missionary became the purveyor of "inflationary Christianity," concerned with numbers of souls converted and of natives in residential schools, of cathedrals and churches built, all legacies of a European value system. It was part of the European organizational process to impose its nature on the local Church.

This underlying cultural assumption in the way the church developed was clearly wrong, because, as he wrote,

> Christianity can never identify itself with any human society, social structure, form of government, establishment, form of charity, evolution or revolution: it is a divine power for all of them, changing from the inside all of them. ... Christianity needs a pre-existing culture, it is a yeast, not a culture itself. Strangely, the mission cum school community did aid the life of many Natives, introducing incentive, hygiene, cleanliness, management and the religious atmosphere of European village life, centred on the Church. It provided the impetus for a group of young natives to turn their critical abilities back onto the Church itself and bring the Church to see her own folly.. It gave many the skill to reject the form of the Church presented and to look for another vision, without the European overlay. They have helped her see that the church's present task is to go back to her true roots, to pursue her original goal of trying to work out Jesus' words within aboriginal traditions: "I come not to destroy but to fulfil," that is, to bring the message of love present in Christ to Cree life.[15]

Vandersteene argued that the evidence of moral loss was found everywhere in the Canadian religious establishment. For example, not a single Alberta missionary studied Cree chant, despite the absolutely central importance of music and song in native culture. The most glaringly strange things were done, such as training indigenous priests in Toronto or Ottawa, when they should have been trained in the bush where their people lived. Even though the church had known for years that it should indigenize itself, it had not done so, in part because of its commitment to an unwieldy bureaucracy:

> The liturgy should have been changed, the Our Father, and the official prayers, and other aspects should have been changed but, of course, nobody did it. Church bureaucracy from Europe stood in the way. In the olden days, you had to contact all the bishops. Then there's the diversity of the Crees. They go on down from Calgary, there are even some in the US, they go way up to the east in Quebec, on both sides

> of the border. Some are in Ontario, even Newfoundland. Really, we would have had to get the whole of Canada and probably the United States together just to change the Hail Mary.[16]

If this line of reasoning were taken to its logical end, one would have to conclude that the hierarchical organization to which he belonged militated against the success of his Christian goals. Wherever he turned in the Church, then, he saw the tragedy of God's people committed to saving Cree souls but constructing organizations consciously or unconsciously designed to eradicate them as distinctive children of God. The Church had brought its own colonialism to interactions with aboriginal cultures and predisposed the construction of a particular type of Church, with certain European expectations required, dictated by a certain European value system: "It was degrees of being bad that we were looking for, not being good." It certainly did not take the Cree normative value system into consideration.

He suggested that leadership like his could only succeed if a radical change came about – a Church had to be fashioned out of the Cree tradition, which could not just be tacked on to the Christian one. The Cree people had to fashion their own church, effectively eliminating the missionary's role entirely. Within his world view, he felt he had to have the concept of church necessary to assist God in building a genuine Cree Church. At the same time, his role in that proposed Cree Church, and even his role in the church as it existed, was either unclear or unsatisfactory to him. This state of affairs seemed to spur him on. When he celebrated mass, or moved among the Cree, he behaved as if he had a special warrant to carry the church beyond what it had been so far. His authority did not seem to derive solely or even principally from the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, despite his being a faithful son of that organization. Rather it arose from the vision he had of a genuine Cree-Christian reality, which gave him special inspiration and power. Part of it came from the religious roles bestowed on him by the Cree people themselves. How he perceived himself within these two dissonant systems is never spelled out clearly in his writings or letters, but it is evident that he felt their tensions. I hear echoes of the Flemish situation in his vision, for he seems to have seen the Cree case through Flemish eyes. What he laboured to construct was a church that would be properly Cree, in the sense in which the Church in Flanders was not properly Flemish.

Responsibility for the loss of moral rectitude in the treatment of aboriginal peoples did not ultimately rest with the church: it fell on Canadians as a whole. The destructive attitude worked in two ways. It fomented a clash that weakened the Cree: "As soon as they had contact with our civilization they just went all to pieces. I never saw dirty shacks like that until I saw that place. Shacks held together with cardboard. It's terrible. You don't see that in the bush." From the point of view of the Cree, the rejection of a valid place for their culture denied them the pride of their own cultural achievements. Vandersteene made much of the fact that a sophisticated language in widespread use in Canada before the Europeans came was systematically undermined, and the whole cultural matrix that sustained it was not even recognized as inherently valuable, despite its

importance in the early days of exploration and discovery. He lamented now that even some Cree had capitulated to this attitude towards the language. Yet that tragedy had many sides to it, and he recognized that such activity was costly for more than the aboriginals, it was costly for Canada's soul, costly for the church, and costly for all those who participated in the destruction – it left them all bereft of moral authority.[17]

For Vandersteene, the destruction meted out to aboriginal society in Canada was generated out of a kind of moral blindness; it spoke volumes about the inability of whites to see what they were doing. They in effect eliminated the Cree as people from whom they could learn what living in Canada might mean. The sense of moral "superiority" dashed the possibility of encountering the insights of a religion that had been generated out of the Canadian experience. Such results were the ultimate cost of colonialism, the reduction of the Cree community to the "savage," while white Canadians stood condemned by their complicity in the destructive process. No wonder whites were stymied by the crime wave among aboriginal youth: the whites had no finger left to point. There was no way out of the impasse. Canadians now faced an apocalypse of their own construction. We may recognize in Vandersteene's vision of Canadian culpability strains from the conflict among elements of Belgian society and the treatment of Flemish language and culture.

5. *Conclusions*

What can be said of Vandersteene's legacy in language and culture? First, that the linguistic and social situation in Flanders constantly informed and influenced the ways in which he went about his mission; he never radically altered his foundation despite the anomalies he faced. Flemish culture was read back through the involvements he faced in Canada, and they dictated how he would react. However, one must also note that only those elements of the Flemish scene which found an echo in Vandersteene played this role: there were no doubt many other such elements which did not become paradigmatic. Nevertheless, paradigms of both language and culture did impose a certain shape on his engagement with the Cree people and their history.

Beyond this, there are some important aspects of the Cree Other in Vandersteene's life. He calls into question a facile notion of the Other. He felt very deeply his own compound problems as an immigrant in Canada. His views are indicative of the lengths that immigrants will go to, to come to terms with the culture in place, indeed to become part of it. To judge by his example, immigrants recast the identity they find in place in Canada and relate to it, and modify it in the light of important legacies from the homeland. As a result Canadian culture is constantly being transformed by migrants' attempts to reshape it according to their concerns. This factor is seldom broached in Canadian discussion of the value of immigrants. It would be instructive to see how such notions affect Canadian culture; for example,Vandersteene's idea of the Cree church may have failed, but his ideas still have an impact in the debate on syncretism, the incorporation of some Cree practices into their Christian religious practice.

Finally, Vandersteene saw both positive and negative aspects of aboriginal culture in Canada, and he felt he had identified the essential weakness of the Canadian

"belonging." His writings suggest that multiculturalism had failed as a way of knitting the disparate elements of Canadian identity together. There were just too many sides of the Other left unexamined in this belonging. Indeed, in Vandersteene's view, the really serious business of engaging the Other in Canadian society had not yet taken place. Part of the problem was that the only consciously recognized division within Canadian culture was that of the English- and French-speaking peoples, characterized as the "two solitudes;" that phrase still dominated Canadian discourse. For Vandersteene the most identifiable multicultural Other in Canada was neither the immigrants nor the French, but the aboriginals, who would remain regardless of any national fracturing. Disenfranchised more than any other group, the aboriginal nevertheless had prior claim to the land and offered us the structures of the mind moulded by the Canadian ecology. Vandersteene seems to argue at various points that until white Canadians engage the reality expressed by aboriginals, they will not be part of the Canadian environment.

One of the tools he saw as necessary for achieving this engagement was language. Canadians needed to grasp the wealth of the Cree language as part of their own inheritance. The quarrel over language in Canada was at least partially based on a kind of collective forgetfulness, by which white Canadians "forgot" those who had been here before them, "forgot" how the first immigrants had adapted, and were determined to function as if there were no value in the collective experience of the aboriginal peoples. If Canadians as a whole acknowledged the rightful position of the Cree as part of their inheritance in this land, then they would truly be rooted in Canada. Otherwise they would remain "other" to the culture and heritage of true Canadian society. He seems to have felt that only by encountering the world of the Other, as depicted in both the language and the sacred of the Cree, would Canadians truly become Canadians. One has to become dual-positional in comprehending this cultural matrix, able to comprehend one's own world through the forms offered by another. If my understanding of Vandersteene's ideas is correct, and I believe it is, he took a strikingly original view of Canadian identity – all the more so because it grew out of a view formed far away in Flanders.

NOTES

[1] For a popular discussion of the Clovis people and current hypotheses, see Kenneth B. Tankersley, "A matter of Superior Spearpoints," *Archeology* July-August 1999, p.60-63, based on John C. Cotter: *Clovis Revisited, New Perspectives on Paleoindian Adaption from Blackwater Draw, New Mexico*, Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1999; Michael B. Collins and Marvin Kay, *Clovis Blade Technology: A Comparative Study of the Kevin Dais Cache*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999; and George Frison: *The Fenn Cache: Clovis Weapons and Tools*, Santa Fe: One Horse Land and Cattle Company, 1999.

[2] See Michel Foucault: *Madness and Civilization, a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, tr. Richard Howard, New York: Vintage Press, 1965.

[3] Vandersteene was christened Roger, but his colleagues in Canada, even those who were French, used the form Rogier, and so

did he, even in his French writings. I have used that form throughout.

[4] The material for this article is drawn from my biographical study, *Dissonant Worlds, Rogier Vandersteene O.M.I. among the Cree*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996. I wish to express my appreciation to several granting agencies: The Boreal Institute; the University of Alberta's Vice-President (Research) Grant and the Faculty of Arts Endowment Fund for the Future; and the Government of Alberta's Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, as well as to the diocese of Grouard and Archbishop Légaré, to the Oblates,and particularly to Vandersteene's colleague Fr. Paul Hernou. The Vandersteene family also gave willing co-operation during this study. It was the Cree people, however, who provided much of the insight that made Vandersteene's impact and achievements measurable. Their help in this research is gratefully and appreciatively acknowledged.

[5] O. Tanghe: *Leven en sterven in de missie der eenzamen*, Amsterdam: Lanoo, 1978, p.56.

[6] For Albrecht Rodenbach's *Gudrun*, see Jan Greshoff: "Belgian Literature in the Dutch Language," in Jan-Albert Goris, ed.: *Belgium*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946, p.286-300.

[7] Vandersteene's private notes.

[8] Quoted in Jan Greshoff: "Belgian Literature in the Dutch Language," in Jan-Albert Goris, ed.: *Belgium*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946, p.292.

[9] Vandersteene's private notes.

[10] Interview with Fr. Paul Hernou, 24 August 1978.

[11] *La Voix* vol. 35, no. 6, p.147.

[12] Rogier Vandersteene: *Wanneer gij uw ogen op God gericht houdt: Brieven aan een religieuze*, Kortrijk, De Riemaeker pvba, 1977, p.39-40.

[13] Rogier Vandersteene: "Among the Cree," presented at a conference to the Daughters of Wisdom in Red Deer, Alberta, in the fall of 1965, and recorded on six tapes. I thank Fr. Jacque Johnson for making these available to me. I have been unable to determine how many of these ideas are original. Theodore F. Zuern, S.J., published "Indians Must Be Indians" in *The Catholic Digest* April 1969, p.76-80, condensed from his earlier essay in *Worldmission*, New York, 1969, containing many of the same ideas, apparently developed during his seven years of service among the urban Indians of Rapid City, Iowa.

[14] I have been unable to trace the precise influences on his thought expressed here. It is clear that the ideas are not new, they are part of the rhetoric behind liberation theology. It is possible that he had read and been influenced by R. Hernegger: *Macht ohne Auftrag? Die Entstehung des Staats- und Volkskirche*, Olten and Freiburg, 1963, where we read: "The religion that marked the West was not properly the Christian message" (p.431).

[15] Vandersteene: "Among the Cree."

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] The idea is expressed in an interesting parallel by Malek Bennabi, *Vocation de*

l'Islam, Paris: Seuil, 1954, English tr. *Islam in History and Society*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1988, p.111: "Colonialism kills the colonized materially and the colonizer morally."