Preaching the Gospel to non-Christian people with the aim of converting them to Christianity was the fundamental rôle of missionaries. Interpreting how the multifaceted strategies of the Jesuits evolved over time presents its own problems. In Japan, the Jesuits constantly revised their methods throughout the second half of the sixteenth century. The more they understood local people, the better they became at gaining converts. The same can be said of the French missionaries in New France in the seventeenth century. As they became acquainted with the local people, their educational methods improved, resulting in more converts.

For a better understanding of the evolution of strategies of the Christian mission in New France, one needs to place it in a longer and broader perspective. In other words, one should also investigate the activities of Jesuit missionaries who were at work a half century earlier outside North America. When the Jesuit missions began in North America, the priests had already established some of their methods based upon two things: the initial plan for founding the Jesuit order; and the order’s experience in other non-Christian regions throughout the world. Comparing the methods used in New France with the approaches undertaken by predecessors, such as those in Japan, will demonstrate the various approaches that served as the prototypes for French missionary strategies.

In order to understand this evolution in methods, it is important to address two issues. First is the question of whether or not one should label the Franciscan missionaries cultural absolutists, and whether or not one should label the Jesuit missionaries cultural relativists. The second issue is whether the Jesuits approached the local population using one method only. Or did they use a variety of methods, separate yet interconnected? If they used one single method, did the Jesuits then pick and choose certain individuals whom they wanted to convert? Also to be kept in mind is how missionaries modified their single-minded method over time. On the other hand, if the Jesuits were using a multifaceted or parallel approach from the outset, they must have
envisaged two target age groups: children and adults, as well as two genders: male and female. If that assumption is correct, the Jesuits may have attempted to interconnect all these groups throughout the contact periods. Because a multifaceted approach is by its very nature broader and more inclusive, there was no need to shift approaches when dealing with potential converts to Christianity. With these two issues in mind, the earlier evolution in Japan will be used here as a basic evangelistic experience to be learnt by later missionaries, or in order to discuss the later development of multifaceted strategies in New France.

A. Japan

1. Missionary Methods in Japan

a. Early Cultural Accommodation and Father Francisco de Xavier

When Father Francisco de Xavier opened the mission to Japan, the first method he developed was a culturally accommodative, if imperfect, approach to individuals. His cultural adaptation was limited to preaching without using European languages or enforcing them upon Japanese neophytes. And yet this attempt is worthy of mention as an initial step towards the cultural accommodation the Jesuits developed through the second half of the sixteenth century. Discussion of Father Xavier’s initiatives when preaching in Japan will require brief consideration of his experience in India in the 1540s, since his approach was based on his own soul-searching about his experience in India. Since most missionaries, including Father Xavier, were unable to comprehend Tamil, a local Indian tongue, all their communication with local people was conducted through native interpreters. The missionaries were not familiar with Indian customs, and thus they failed to see that people of India comprehended little of what the Jesuits were teaching. Of course, the priests failed to comprehend the answers given by the Indians, and the priests only half understood what the interpreters were saying. Because the people had to learn prayers that they did not fully understand, they were baptised without a deep knowledge of Roman Catholic doctrine.¹