

An Experiment in Indigenization in Evangelism

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Robert de Nobili's unusual approach to those of other faiths in his attempt to win them over to Christianity fills one's mind with questions as to the soundness of his way. Donning the robes of a sannyasi, giving people to understand that he was a Brahmin, and eating vegetarian meals prepared by a Brahmin cook, he strove to teach the faith he professed, and to win adherents for the same.

Throwing light on questions that assail one's mind in regard to this matter, Vincent Cronin's book, *A Pearl to India*, published in 1959 (Rupert Hart-Davis, Soho Square, London), deals with the life and work of Robert de Nobili, and gives a full, comprehensive and sympathetic account of the work of this missionary in the Madurai Mission in South India for a period of fifty years from 1605 onwards. The methods adopted by his predecessors and those practised by him in promoting Roman Catholicism are described and illustrated. A few of the enlightening accounts in this book relevant to the caption of this paper are briefly dealt with here. Critical appraisal of Nobili's work, however, which is better left to competent theologians, is not attempted by the writer of this article.

Born in 1577 in Rome of noble and aristocratic rank in a family claiming descent from the Emperor Otho III, Robert de Nobili was, from early years, greatly influenced by the accounts he heard of the courage evinced, and the brave deeds performed, by illustrious members of his family. With definite leanings, even as a youth, towards values which enhance the spiritual nature of man, he abdicated his title of Count of Civitella in favour of his younger brother, and likewise renounced the inheritance left to him by his father, Count Pier Francesco de Nobili.

Fascinated by the challenge that missionary work in India held, he arrived in Goa in May 1605, and from thence travelled to the east coast, and joined the Madurai Mission. Filled with zeal for extending Christ's kingdom, he desired to ascertain the most effective way of attaining this goal. Looking at the work of his predecessors, he was disappointed to find that, in spite of much earnest effort on the part of his earlier and present colleagues, no

gains had been made. The converts won over were few in number.

In studying the causes for such poor response, he perceived that, despite the hard work of missionaries, the presentation of the new religion made hardly any appeal to the people. The reasons for this state of affairs were two-fold, that is, the assessment that the people made, firstly, of the missionaries who did the teaching, and, secondly, of the religion, which they were invited to accept. The personnel attempting the conversions, the foreign missionaries, failed to secure the regard of the nationals. Their way of life was not such as to make an appeal to the people. Living in costly mansions, dressed in a foreign outfit that included leather shoes, nourished by a non-vegetarian diet, speaking a language that required an interpreter, they failed to match the gurus of the land, who were respected not only for the enlightenment they promoted, but also for their way of life, which, indeed, was an exemplary pattern for their disciples. For these reasons, the missionaries from abroad were looked upon as aliens, and were called 'Parangis'. This term of contempt conveyed the meaning that those denoted by the word belonged to a low caste, comparable to the 'Paraiyans', the very sight of whom was considered to pollute the high caste Brahmins, and who, therefore, had their movements restricted.

Conversion to the Christian faith was thought to bring one down to the level of this despised group. Furthermore, the new faith seemed to be foreign in every way. Its adoption, therefore, involved the snapping of one's social, religious and cultural moorings. With these misgivings that held people back from adopting the new faith, Christianity in this country had a bleak prospect.

Nobili, therefore, felt that he should ponder over the matter and adopt a method of procedure in his evangelistic work which, while establishing some common ground with the people's traditional customs and cultural practices, would at the same enable him to maintain and convey the uniqueness of the new faith. In short, Christianity was to take on local colour, and be presented in an Indian garb. If, along these lines, the Church were to step out from 'the snug and safe Noah's ark of Europe', it would win not merely Madurai's Brahmins, but all the people of the country, and, in fact, all the nations of the world. It would, then, be established that Christianity may have as its adherents not merely the inhabitants of the West, but those of the entire globe. It would transcend national barriers, and prove itself to be a universal religion. These points of contact of the new religion with the cultural background of the people should not, however, blur the uniqueness of the faith to be taught.

Within the framework of these guiding principles, Nobili worked out in detail the method he had selected as being the most psychological, the most sensible, and the most effective approach. In order to make himself acceptable to Indians as their

spiritual teacher, he adopted such ways of living as were characteristic of the country's religious teachers. He felt that he should live in a simple abode that would be similar to that of the gurus in the country. He, therefore, shifted from the Mission house built in the Portuguese style with tiled roof and floor, and moved into a small hut with thatched roof and cow-dung smeared floor. His hermitage was located where only the upper castes may live. His simple vegetarian meals were cooked by a Brahmin servant, who wore no clothes waist upwards, and wore the sacred thread, the badge of his high caste. Nobili attired himself in the simple robes of the sannyasi, and wore the sacred thread worn by Brahmins.

However, there was a difference between the two threads, a difference called for by the Christian faith. Whereas the one worn by the Brahmins had three strands, that used by Nobili had five. Of these five, three symbolized the Holy Trinity, and the remaining two, the soul and body of Christ. With the addition of a cross, the thread stood for the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption.

Besides his habitation and his attire, which were determined by local traditions, his programme of work also was similarly conditioned. Father Nobili hardly ever ventured out of his abode. He spent his time in meditation, and in interviewing seekers after truth.

In trying to remove any language barrier between himself and his disciples, Nobili made for further likeness between himself and an Indian guru. Not only did he make himself proficient in Tamil to the extent that he could express himself in this medium fluently and flawlessly, and quote relevant passages from the poets, but he acquired such perfect pronunciation that the learned Brahmins could not improve on it. These accomplishments won him the admiration of the people, and lured them to his presence. In course of time, his mastery of Tamil improved so much that he wrote several religious tracts in this most difficult and highly developed Dravidian language. In later years, he extended his knowledge of Indian languages by becoming proficient in Telugu and Sanskrit. Realizing the importance of the medium of expression in religious life, Nobili made the bold venture of seeking permission from Rome to replace the use of Latin with Sanskrit as the liturgical language of the new Indian Church. The permission, however, was not granted.

Nobili felt that it would be too much to expect newly won converts to break off entirely from their traditional ways of life. As a Roman, he was aware of the fact that it took some centuries for the Christians there to represent the crucifixion in any manner, as death on the Cross shocked their sensibilities. He understood, therefore, that in the case of newly won Hindu converts, he would need to make concessions for them. Thus, in observing an agricultural feast, 'Pongal', the Hindus boiled rice in milk before the idols of their deities. The non-observance of this festival by

Christian converts seemed as if it would depress them exceedingly. Therefore, Nobili allowed them to celebrate the feast, but under a Cross in place of the idols they had used before their conversion. Nobili felt that such concessions were necessary until the faith of the new converts became deep-rooted enough to enable them to endure persecution and trials that menaced their religious professions.

Nobili, however, was unyielding in certain respects, so that his disciples realized that it was, indeed, a new and unique faith into which they had been admitted. When he was asked by Hindus whether he believed in the stories of their gods, he gave the unequivocal answer that inasmuch as they had contradictions, he did not believe them. In regard to the Vedanta, Nobili said that God and soul do not so merge as to become a composite unit. If the soul thus became one with God, it would lose its individuality, and cease to be as such. He similarly rejected the Vedanta doctrine of the world being an illusion. He maintained that the external world, far from being an illusion, was an actual entity. This contention of his earned him the title, the Teacher of Reality.

Nobili also had positive teachings about Christianity. Desiring to preserve the Catholic faith intact, he summed up his teachings and proclaimed that God became man to save men. 'I declare', he said, 'that His name is Jesus Christ; that He is true God and true Man, that He is full of grace, and that He delivers us from sin.'

While staunchly maintaining the uniqueness of the Christian faith, he sought, at the same time, to build a bridge to span Hinduism and Christianity. He collected verses from the Hindu sacred writings to illustrate the truth of Christianity. He held the view that Christianity would have a compelling force on every orthodox Hindu if it could be demonstrated that Christianity was the crown of Hinduism.

With such an approach, Nobili's work resulted in there coming to be in Madurai and its neighbourhood 4,183 Christian converts, of which number, 1,208 were of the high caste. To the latter belonged Nobili's Brahmin teacher, Sivadarma, who was baptized by Nobili himself.

The Church of Rome, however, varied in its attitude to Nobili's work from time to time. He died in 1656, a broken man, because of the misunderstandings created, and because he was not granted his dearest wish to remain in the Madurai Mission to the end of his days.