

THE EXPERIENCE OF ROBERTO DE NOBILI IN INDIA

Dr. Mariasusai Dhavamony S.J.

1. The problem of method

In any human activity done in the context of human group the question of method is of primary importance, for here in a special way are involved human sensibilities, prejudices, commitments and communal good and well-being. Above all when we deal with missionary activity of the Church, the problem of method reaches in all its complexity the most sensitive area of human beings, for religion is not only the core of human interest but also the most intimate and cherished possession of a human being. As Roberto De Nobili¹ landed in India in 1605, he reflected much on the method followed by his colleagues in the mission apostolate in India. There was no lack of zeal and devotion on the part of the missionaries of that period. On the contrary these showed extraordinary dedication to the work of conversion of the non-Christians. They showed great courage and heroism in the face of innumerable and unsurmountable difficulties. Of course insufficiency of personel and resources was keenly felt. Imminence of the task of the world mission was formidable. In spite of all these failure in the mission in India was a fact that Roberto De Nobili had to face in all its objectivity and despair. He soon realized that the real reason for this failure was the defect in the method used in the missionary activity. The problem of the method thus gained its importance in his thinking and acting.

¹Roberto De Nobili was born in September 1577 at Montepulciano in Tuscony of an illustrious family (Popes and Cardinals). Julius III before becoming Pope was Presedent of the Council of Trent. Cardinal Roberto De Nobili was the son of Vincenzo and uncle of the missionary, noted for sanctity. Cardinal bellarmine

2. De Nobili's approach

De Nobili soon realized that the missionaries' task in India was not to transform the Hindu Society into a copy of the European One, even though the copy would be perfect. Further, the task should not consist in taking part even actively in the socio-cultural aspects of Hindu life for the sake of such and such a colonial power, to reinforce this power or to side with it at the cost of the cultural heritage of India. But the task of the missionaries consists uniquely in presenting the Christian Message to the deeply religious soul of India. In this De Nobili followed the method of adaptation which in fact is a form of inculturation. We can define the method of adaptation as a form of inculturation as follows. It is the presentation of the Christian Message to the soul of India in the form and in the language adapted to its spiritual needs, to the categories of its mind and to its intellectual habits. The adaptation of those ways and means through which Christian Message can be presented in an Indian manner and become rooted in the Indian soil is what is aimed at in this approach.

The principle of adaptation is rooted in the principle of pedagogy; namely, (1) to adapt the teaching to the thought patterns and intellectual habits of the listeners; (2) to make the best of the depth of knowledge already acquired and to avoid hurting in front of false ideas and established prejudices. The European (Portuguese) form under which Christianity had been presented until then was estranged from Indian mentality; there was no attempt to understand Indian theological and intellectual traditions of India. There was the rejection of what was Indian in the way of beliefs and customs. Actually to become a Christian had meant to enter a "foreign caste", with all its customs that were repugnant to India. Further, the few efforts that were made to translate the Christian beliefs into Tamil were very deficient, owing to a lack of a deep knowledge of the language and its literature. De Nobili not only understood the defect of this method of evangelization but strongly opposed it and introduced the method of adaptation.

was the uncle of the missionary. Roberto De Nobili entered the Society of Jesus against the will of his parents. He did his philosophical and theological studies at Naples, then at Rome. He asked to be sent to India. Again his parents objected. "Where it is a question of obeying God, one ought not to see in face anyone;" he is reported to have said. In 1604 he sailed for Lisbon for Goa; after a long and perilous sea voyage (twelve months) he arrived there. He died in 1656.

This method of adaptation was not new, he claimed, for the Apostles and ancient Church followed it. De Nobili describes his method of adaptation in a letter to the Jesuit General, Claude Acquaviva, sent in 1609 thus:

"I make use of their good dispositions (desire of eternal bliss) to tell them that if they want to be saved, they must listen to me; that I have come from very remote countries with the sole intention of bringing them salvation by teaching them that spiritual law, which, according to their Brahmins, had been completely lost. I adapt myself thus to their views, to the example of the Apostle, who preached to the Athenians the unknown God."²

"In whichever country the priest enters, he should keep guard against even venial sins, and walk on the path of perfection. But in each country there are customs, which are not sinful. The priest should consider these and find out which custom is harmful to the spread of the faith, and of course he should avoid it. However if he finds it very advantageous to the spread of the faith, it is wise and just to take it up."³

External adaptation: De Nobili made himself Indian and Brahmin to gain Brahmins to Christ. He realized that in India the teacher of spiritual values was traditionally the ascetic, the sannyasin. Hence it behoved the Christian teacher as well to live like such ascetics. Such a mode of life was to be thorough and to be based on spiritual convictions. Its exterior forms could be changed as De Nobili himself did alter and drop some of his earliest borrowings like the sacred thread. In his eyes such an ascetic form of life is necessary to make India ready to accept the Christian faith.

Sympathy and Respect: De Nobili had profound respect and admiration for Indian culture and religious quest. He genuinely praised the elaborate and diversified wealth of thought and culture, possessed by scholars, sages and poets of India. He acquired an extensive knowledge of Hindu literature, both the sacred Scriptures and the Com-

² See A. Rocaries, *Robert de Nobili S.J., ou le 'Sannyasi' Chrétien*, Paris, 1967, pp. 146-147.

³ See *Dūṣaṇā Dhikkāram* (Refutation of Calumnies), edited by S. Rajamanickam S.J., Tuticorin, 1964, p. 493.

mentaries on them by philosophers. He succeeded in acquiring an extraordinary knowledge of the three Indian languages, Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu, in which he wrote books. He was practically the first foreigner to know the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* literature, especially the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Epics and the Purānas. He also knew the Tamil religious literature.

Though he disliked the so-called idolators, he sympathized with their fundamental religious aspirations, for, according to him, "they imbibe everything, all actions, with 'superstition', like St Paul ardently wishing the Christian to act always in the name of Christ."⁴ "Those poor peoples are possessed by an ardent desire for eternal bliss and to merit it they devote themselves to penance, alms and the cult of their idols."⁵ De Nobili was convinced of the deep and extraordinary religious quest in the Hindu minds. He had also great esteem for the knowledge, intelligence and ideals of the Brahmins of his days. In a letter to Fr A. Laerzio in 1609 he writes: "We think that those men have no knowledge! I can assure you that they are far from (such a state); just now I am reading one of their books which is a real philosophical treatise almost with the same terminology as those I studied in Rome; although fundamentally their philosophy is very different from ours."⁶ "Who can bear witness to the profoundly religious life of so many Hindus without 'realizing' more completely the communion of saints, communion of all souls who either in the visible Church or outside of it are elevated to heaven by grace, are illumined by the rays refracted and in broken pieces, but proceeding still from the Father of lights?"

3. Doctrinal adaptation

In De Nobili's writings there are many theological discussions recorded with Hindu gurus and educated Brahmins. We shall briefly expose the main contents of these discussions to see how he approached Hinduism doctrinally and theologically in his method of adaptation.

(a) *Multitude of Gods in Hinduism*. De Nobili convincingly argues for the unity of God by arguments drawn from perfection and absolute independence of divine nature.

⁴ *Informatio de quibusdam moribus nationis indicae*, in *Roberto De Nobili on Indian Customs* (1613), ed. by S. Rajamanickam S.J. Palayamkottai, 1972, p. 127.

⁵ Letter of De Nobili to A. Laerzio, 24 Dec. 1608, in: *La Mission du Maduré*, by A. Bertrand, Paris, 1848, Vol. II, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibidem* p. 28.

(b) *Creation*. De Nobili had difficulty in convincing the Hindus the Christian idea of creation. The wise of India, he says, starting from the principle that nothing is made of nothing, admit three eternal things: *Pati* (God), *Paśu* (soul), *Paśam* (bondage). He made use of ordinary arguments of philosophy to prove that if *pasu* was not created, he would be God; further if *Pati* could not create or draw from nothing, then he would not be all-powerful, and consequently not God, since his action, similar to those of secondary causes, would be limited to modify forms. He developed arguments by applications and comparisons.

(c) *Transmigration*. First he tackled the argument of the variety of conditions of man which cannot be explained except by admitting merits and demerits anterior to the present life. He said that the soul would not be the form of body but is found shut up as a bird in a cage (Platonists). De Nobili responded that (1) the soul and body constitute one composite which is man, which lives, which is manifold, which operates in such a way that its actions are neither of the body nor of the soul alone; while the bird and the cage have between them no real natural relation. (2) Sin being of infinite malice, difference of conditions and passing miseries of this life cannot be by themselves expiation of sin. (3) Differences between rich and poor, Brahmin and pariah, joyous and sad, etc. come from secondary causes of which God is not obliged to suspend the actions. He wishes to show by this how contemptible are greatness, riches, joys of this World in comparison with those of the other world. We merit by the good use of the goods and by patience in face of the bad. In every well regulated society a subordination is necessary. If all were kings, it would be fictions of kings without subjects, generals without soldiers. In the human body if all members were heads, it would be a monster. *Argumentum ad hominem*: God creates Brahmin from his head... Now the first Brahmin, the first *râjâ* (king), the first pariah (low caste) could not have any merit or demerit, previous to their first production, etc..

(d) *Eternal happiness*. Some Brahmins asked De Nobili: what is eternal bliss and what is the way which conduces men to achieve it. In this context De Nobili shows his profound knowledge of the Hindu tradition. The Hindus believe in the four Vedas, three of which exist even today; the fourth was the spiritual Veda by means of which one can attain salvation of soul. This fourth Veda, partly mixed with the first three but the greatest part of it, is lost entirely.

Hence some Brahmins claim that there was no salvation to be attained; others denied future life after death. De Nobili tells them that they live in fatal error. None of the three existing Vedas has power to save souls. The Hindus have an ardent desire of eternal good; in order to merit it, they do penance, give alms, perform rites to idols. He takes this occasion to teach them the spiritual Veda which is Christianity. Thus I adopt myself to their views after the example of Paul who preached to the Athenians the unknown God. Once they decided to become my disciples, they are disposed to believe the doctrine I teach. To the question what is eternal bliss, I cite their sacred texts and prove that the Vedas and Hindu rites cannot procure the eternal happiness. Eternal happiness which is salvation comes from Christianity.

(c) *Presence of God and the Vision of Him.* If God is everywhere and in our souls, why cannot we see him with the eyes of the soul; he would also suffer with us; why we do not follow the same law in our way of life as his. De Nobili replies: the sun is everywhere by its light and still he who closes his eyes or windows does not see it. To see an object placed before me I need light. God is everywhere in different ways: by essence, by presence, and by power. The more so in the souls who follow his law; he is present by his grace; it is this light which makes one see him. Thus only these see him in their soul. But God is not in the soul after the manner to make a composite with it, such as that which results from soul and body. Therefore the sufferings of the soul cannot affect him.

(f) *Virtue and Sin.* To the question what is virtue and what is sin, De Nobili answers thus. There are morally good works which still do not merit heaven, such as the works of those who do not know true God. There are others which are good and worthy of heaven. The Hindus reply: he who touches fire burns, even if he does not know the nature of fire. He who takes a remedy heals even though he ignores the qualities of this remedy. It ought to be the same with respect to good works. De Nobili replies that the goodness and malice of actions do not depend on the nature of the physical act but on the interior act of the soul, on its intention. He adds that sin consists in quitting God and turning oneself to an evil object. He supports this argument on the authority of the texts taken from Sanskrit sacred books. The Hindus were satisfied and De Nobili observes that God would do the rest.

(g) *An original revelation?* De Nobili does not mention often any kind of God's addressing man through traditional Hinduism. Ho-

wever we come across some passages in the "Informatio" which are striking and significant. "Moreover. . . the Vedanta theologians explain well nigh the divine attributes stressing their absolute character, for instance they show that God is the self-sufficient being, eternal, incorporeal, good by nature, present everywhere, cause of everything. . . and in our own times there lives a serious author who writes on the same subject with acumen." On the relations between God and the world the Hindus say: "In the laws of the Maiavadas many texts refer to the real cause of the world's existence and to God's oneness. . . such views as may well be and should be acceptable to Christians. For instance in the Arana (*Taitt. Up.*) it is written: Thou art God, very light resplendent. I call thee true, Truth, God resplendent!"

There appears to be even some prescience of the Trinitarian mystery: "What is yet more surprising, I discover in these texts even an adumbration of the recondite mystery of the most High Trinity, the Most Gracious and Most High God, vouchsafing doubtless even to these far distant lands some inkling of the most hidden secret of our faith through the teaching of some sage living among these people, in much the same way as by a rather mysterious inspiration he designed to illumine the Sybils, Trismagistus, and certain other Masters of human wisdom in our parts of the globe. . ." The meaning of the text (*Taitt. Up.* 1.6) is as follows: "That very person within his nature is spirit; in him is one who is likewise spirit existing through an act of the will; and he who exists through the mouth (i.e. the World) is held close to that person's breast (i.e. the Son), that person together (with others) is Lord and (efficient) cause of all things."⁷

De Nobili concludes about *Śruti*: "These laws can be retained in so far as they proposed moral ideals and social subjects. . . are they not saying many things that are compatible with the true Religion, some specimens of which I mentioned a little while before?"⁸

(h) *Various grades of spiritual attitude.* The Brahmins are wise men. There are three categories of them. The Buddhists (those of old Buddhism but subordinated and absorbed into Hinduism) who are agnostics or atheists; the gnani, spiritual men who refuse to be bound to ritual and idol-worship; idolators who keep alive rites and sacrifice. De Nobili's sympathy with the gnanis who propose the theology of the Vedanta is well known. He admitted the Buddhists as men of

⁷ *Informatio*, op. cit. p. 43.

⁸ *Ibidem* p. 45.

learning and natural philosophy. He condemns idolators, followers of idol worship in strong terms: false errors, superstitions.

De Nobili's attitude towards Hinduism can be described thus. He was not satisfied with presenting Christianity as the only true religion. He spent time refuting various Hindu beliefs such as pantheism and transmigration. He pointed out gross errors of idolatry and superstition. But at the same time he made much of the similarities discovered between Hinduism and Christianity.

These points which we have mentioned above give sufficient idea of the manner in which the missionary took account of Hindu ideas in order to gain the Brahmins. To serve oneself of the truths dispersed in their writings, fragments of truth found in the immense Hindu literature in order to lead the Brahmins of Madurai to the light of Christianity was the sum and substance of his apostolate. In a language used by their classical authors, in terms appropriate to their turn of mind, he puts in their reach the principles of Christian theology and philosophy.

4. Practical adaptation

It should be noted that De Nobili was not satisfied with applying the method of adaptation to the exposition of the Gospel message of salvation. He went further. He paid close attention to the Christian life. He reflected on the kind of encounter that was practised until now with non Christians in Madurai. He wished that the new Christians continue to conform themselves to the honest customs of the caste of India. His principle in this endeavour was: *Make Christian Indians* without disindianizing them. He admitted the rule of the caste system but condemned severely its excesses. He recommended to his Brahmin neophytes the rule of charity taught by Christ and the Apostles.

Among the customs and usages prevalent among the Hindu society De Nobili distinguished four kinds of acts. (1) There are the idolatrous acts by their very nature and/or by institution such as sacrifices, oaths, invocations. (2) There are certain acts which are indifferent by themselves but have been introduced to establish a distinction which was purely practical; such as in Rome one distinguishes Jews by their yellow cap which they are obliged to wear as a distinguishing mark of a Jew. (3) There are certain acts which are indifferent by themselves but have been instituted to establish a distinc-

tion which was purely religious, such as priestly dress, which have no other end except that of sacrifice. (4) There are acts which bring together these two ends; namely, the religious end and the political or natural end; i.e., clothes, ornaments, etc.

De Nobili evaluates these acts with respect to Christian living and behaving. According to him, and it appears to us quite rightly, the first kind of acts, i.e., the idolatrous acts by their nature or by institution, are illicit; so are the acts of the third kind, i.e., the acts indifferent by themselves but have been instituted to establish a distinction purely religious; these are also illicit. The acts of the second kind, i.e., those which are indifferent by themselves but have been instituted to establish a distinction which is purely political, are licit. Those of the fourth kind, i.e., the acts which bring together these two ends, political and religious, such as clothes and ornaments, etc. are licit on condition that the superstitious end is rejected.

The acts or the things whose institution and object are in the first place civil or natural and only in the second place or *per accidens* religious or superstitious are certainly allowed without the superstitious or idolatrous intention. With stronger reason are allowed acts and objects which have neither primary nor secondary religious or superstitious end in their institution; they only become superstitious or idolatrous by the manner or intention of individuals who observe them.

Acting on this De Nobili permitted his Christians to celebrate the feast of Pongal which corresponds merely to our new year festival or harvest festival. It has in itself nothing of religious solemnity only. As in India everything is religious, Pongal is consecrated to the God of the Sun; so also the feast of the bulls and other animals.

Again, *kudumi* is a purely distinctive sign of the caste. So also the Brahmanic cord, not religious by itself. So also the sandal Tilak on the forehead and limbs. Camphor, sandal, musk (scent), saffron, collar (necklace), ring, bracelets, jewels, pendants; all this can be worn in order to ornament the body. "As clothes are ornaments of the body, patience is the ornament of the soul; as sandal is the ornament of the front, numerous children are the ornaments of the family." No relation to religion as such in all this. But he prohibited ashes and other powder consecrated to idols, which non-Christians carry. Christians wear sandal blessed in the Church.

5. The controversy over his method of adaptation

During the life-time of De Nobili there arose a vigorous contro-

versy around the method of adaptation which he proposed and put into practice. Some objected saying that he gave inadmissible concessions to paganism which are incompatible with the true Christian religion. This is a gross exaggeration as we have seen before, for De Nobili did not make it a secret that he was strongly opposed to paganism, to pagan superstitions and idolatrous practices, for which he incurred enmity and opposition from the Hindus themselves, especially from the Brahmins. They accused especially the use of sandal, ablutions, Brahmanic cord, *kuḍumi* (tuft), introduction of new terms in catechism, etc. We have seen above their justification. Others said that the new method of adaptation was bad not by its concessions to Indian habits but by its non-portuguese or anti-portuguese character and attitude. De Nobili and his neophytes repudiated any relation with parangis, namely with the portuguese.

For Fr Fernandez repudiation of parangism means denial of Christianity. De Nobili refutes his charge by saying that the great imprudence of the Portuguese was to accept and appropriate the name of parangi, to have called the Christian religion a religion of parangis as found in their catechism. *Paraṅki kulam puṭikka Vēnumō?* (Do you wish to embrace Christian religion?), as found rendered in their catechism. Do you wish to enter the caste of parangis? Christianity is called parangi marga, manner of living of the parangis. This has an exclusive sense because the Hindus admit besides their common gods a divinity proper to each caste (*Kulateivam, Iṣṭadevata*) to which they render a peculiar cult; the idea of a caste leads to the idea of religion and to the particular divinity. There is necessarily a religion proper to each caste which one cannot profess without giving up one's caste. Christianity as an exclusive religion of the parangis, the cross as the distinctive sign of the parangism, were introduced through imprudence, arising from the ignorance of language and manners of the Indians, which led to the impossibility of preaching the Gospel to India. De Nobili dissipated this prejudice wisely and taught Christianity as the universal religion of all peoples and of all cultures. Christianity is not the exclusive religion of one caste.

6. Conclusión

De Nobili understood profoundly the socio-ethico-religious traditions of India, especially of the Tamil India. This understanding is an essential aspect of his method of adaptation. His approach to the Hindus was not only of external adaptation to the customs of dress,

food, life style, but more profoundly of internal adaptation to the mind and heart of India, its intellectual habits and patterns of thinking and understanding, an adaptation to the spiritual and religious quest of India in its depth and authenticity. To preach the Gospel not only as adapted to the language, customs, modes of thinking but also as inserted into the religious soul of India in its quest for salvation and ultimate destiny is precisely what is called the method of planting the Gospel in the culture of India, or inculturation of the Gospel in India. This method of adaptation followed by De Nobili can be termed inculturation of the Gospel as understood and put into practice by De Nobili in his time. Now we give a still new orientation to the meaning of inculturation; namely, not only expressing the Gospel in Indian language and mode of understanding and living but also enriching the understanding of the Gospel message itself through the interaction of the insights of Indian culture and spirituality; India can contribute to the deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ and his redemption.
