



January 1991

R. de Nobili a Forerunner of Hindu-Christian Dialogue

Richard DeSmet

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeSmet, Richard (1991) "R. de Nobili a Forerunner of Hindu-Christian Dialogue," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 4, Article 2.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1040>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

R. de Nobili as Forerunner of Hindu-Christian Dialogue

Richard DeSmet

Jñānadeepa Vidyāpeetha, Pune
Résid. De Nobili College, Pune, 411 014, India

IS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE as we understand and practise it today a concept which can help us discern better the nature of Father Robert de Nobili's undertaking in sixteenth century Madurai and enrich ourselves from his experience? Was he not above all a religious guide, a *guru* known as *Tattuva Podagar* (the 'awakener to metempirical reality')? Is not this the title by which, on January 6, 1656, ten days before his death, he authenticated the twenty volumes of *olas* which despite his blindness he had dictated in his San Thomé retreat? Had he not endeavoured constantly to proclaim the saving truth of the Gospel rather than simply keeping up a Hindu-Christian dialogue? But let us turn for a moment to the notion of inter-religious dialogue.

The Present Theological Understanding of Inter-religious Dialogue

The October 1990 issue of the *Bulletin of the North-American Board for East-West Dialogue*, p. 11, contained a text which seemed to be quoted as a complete definition of dialogue. It was from a book composed in French by the Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis. I shall now quote it from the English version which he himself established for its English edition:

Thus dialogue does not serve as a means to an ulterior end. Neither on one side nor on the other does it tend to the "conversion" of one partner to the religious tradition of the other. Rather it tends to a more profound conversion of each to God. The same God speaks in the heart of both partners; the same Spirit is at work in all.¹

It had sounded different in that *Bulletin* in the editor's own translation from the French: "Dialogue is not a means to some further end. It is not directed from either side to the "conversion"...etc." It had made me feel uneasy because its first lines seemed to echo the peremptory exclusions proffered by some writers of lesser theological respectability. So I decided to trace it back to its context. It is actually the first part of the paragraph which closes a double chapter devoted by Dupuis to the theology of dialogue (X and XI). Ch. X is entitled, "Interreligious dialogue in the evangelizing mission of the Church." It explains that this mission is a "unitary but complex and articulated reality." Dialogue is a "constitutive dimension of it." Within its "global" identity it is "a privileged form of evangelization." And finally:

Evangelization reaches its fullness in the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Interreligious dialogue constitutes a mutual evangelization under the impulse of the Spirit.²

The last noted characteristic is original to Dupuis. I do not find it in the recent encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*. The latter, however, amply confirms the doctrine of those two chapters:

Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission...It has special links with its mission *ad gentes* [to the nations] and is one of its expressions...In the context of this mission...these two elements of evangelization, [namely, proclaiming Christ and engaging in inter-religious dialogue,] must maintain their intimate connection and their distinctiveness.

2 Richard DeSmet

Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover 'seeds of the Word'...; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions...stimulate the Church both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence...as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fulness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.³

The Dialogical Qualities of de Nobili

The rich personality of Nobili⁴ presents both natural endowments and acquired qualities which fitted him for dialogue and not only for proclamation.

He was not by nature a humorous man but he had a clear mind which could be practical as well as deep. As to his memory, it was phenomenal. In stature he was tall and imposing. His companion Sebastian de Maya, in his letter of August 8, 1640, noted "that imposing tone of voice which is particular to him and commands the respect of all" but also "the charm of his refined courtesy. The impression he makes on those who visit us [in jail where both of us have been for seventeen days already] is such that it is generally believed that he has the art of bewitching and binding to himself all those who come to speak with him."⁵

From his early youth and during his Jesuit formation he had developed his intellectual as well as his religious virtues. From 1599 to 1604, he read philosophy (2 years) and theology (4 years). "From my youth, he writes in his *Apology* of 1610, I thought it my duty to cherish and specialize in these sciences, (namely, philosophy and theology, rather than in others."⁶

From his philosophical studies he derived his conviction that reason could be trusted and his belief in the universality of reason. Hence, he would not be tempted to assume a persistence of the biblical primitive revelation in order to explain the presence in the Indian tradition of authentic fundamental truths. During his theological studies, he already aspired to be sent to India and this seems to have made him

more attentive to those passages in Scripture, such as Paul's address to the Athenians on the Areopagus, which show sensitivity to the values of the Gentiles and awareness of the religious truths held in their culture; and further to those Church Fathers and theologians who had not been afraid of implanting Christianity within and in harmony with the various ethnic cultures: St. Gregory the wonderworker, St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine of Canterbury and pope St. Gregory the Great who had sent him to the English with the recommendation not to destroy but to adapt. Such and others Nobili would later on adduce from memory in support of his method of adaptation.

Professor Francis X. Clooney has exposed very clearly how explicit and commanding were the principles which Nobili derived from that self-training. Speaking of his practice he writes:

He argued against notions such as *karma*, Hindu ideas of heaven, the after-life and modes of union with the divine, etc. (but...his attacks relied on reason, and reason is universal, and, at the most profound level, perfectly consonant only with Christianity...Reason is the principal medicine used in "curing" sinful human experience and reopening it to the divine. Citing a distinction made...by Aquinas in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (I.3.2-3), de Nobili suggested that while the mysteries of God's grace are not merely rational and are never merely the property of reason, they never contradict reason and never violate what we know by other means (*Tūṣaṇa Tikkāram*: 5.3-4).

The proper use of docile (in the old sense), free from ignorance and error, and ready to receive the higher divine mysteries...It also provides a reliable critique of beliefs which are irrational and therefore incompatible with true religion...A truly reasonable person can have no objection to Christianity....

Argument had nothing to do with the superiority of Europe over India or of 'Christianity' over 'Hinduism' [terms which he did not use]. Rather he sought simply to clarify and reorganize Indian experience, restoring it to its natural order and readiness for the divine.⁷

In an effort to appraise critically these convictions of de Nobili, Clooney shows that "his belief in the universality of reason is pre-modern, and is the feature of his thought that most clearly divides him from most modern missionaries and most modern scholars of religion."⁸ To my mind, however, it retains its value in our approach to many a Hindu and, in practice, makes the dialogue smooth, friendly and fruitful.

Among the psychological dispositions to dialogue noted by Dupuis or the encyclical, such as humility, frankness, love for truth, tolerance, there is above all the positive readiness to perceive the worth of others, even very different from ourselves, and of their personal beliefs and religious traditions. Nobili possessed to a high degree this openness of mind which leaves no place for the intrusion of cultural or ethnic prejudices.

But he went much further than that: In Pauline fashion he decided to be truly Indian among the Indians and even to live his Jesuit renunciation in the manner of the Tamil *sannyāsīs*. He not only rid himself of every vestige of parangism (Portuguese appearance) but made himself most proficient in three languages (Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit), mastered large portions of their literatures (from the Vedas and the codes of *dharma* (law) to the *darśanas* (philosophical traditions) and *Purāṇas* (corpus of legends) and popular songs and poems. He observed the customs of the people, studied their origin and signification and could refer to a large number of proper authorities to support his judgment that some implied adherence to religious sects but others were of purely civil relevance. All this is well known and in no need of a new exposition.

De Nobili in Active Dialogue

In his letter of December 7, 1617 to the future saint Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, Nobili wrote:

Before I had learned the Sciences of the Brahmins and read their books, I myself was of opinion that all Indian modes of worship were to be condemned, because I saw that they differed widely from our European ways. I taxed with superstition practices of which I knew neither

the nature nor the purpose. But when by God's mercy I was given though unworthy access to Sanskrit, their learned language, which so far none of ours had learned (for it is unheard of that they should teach it to Europeans) I came to know that all those things which are now being controverted refer to their social customs. Therefore...I changed my mind and rallied to the opposite, though less comfortable, opinion.

We know how quickly after arriving at Madurai he saw the need of, and started, living in strictly orthodox Tamil fashion, apart from his Portuguese confrere and his tongue and ways. The latter employed as schoolmaster a high-caste Shaiva well-versed in Hindu theology. He had the title of *guru* and was an intelligent enquirer after truth but not at all attracted by the faith of his Parangi employer. Nobili requested his help for his study of Tamil. Gradually his friendliness, courtesy, intelligence and keenness to absorb Tamil culture won the confidence and friendliness of his tutor. It is from conversations with him that he came to understand how vile in Tamil eyes was whatever they called parangi and how indispensable it was to separate himself from it.

After Nobili had settled as a *sannyāsī* in his own house with high-caste servants and a Brahmin cook to prepare his single daily vegetarian meal, that man became completely sympathetic and began to praise him among his high-caste fellows. Out of curiosity they began to visit him, found that he spoke wisely about religious things and *would listen* to them not only with courtesy and kindness but with keen interest. Whether they narrated stories from the *Purāṇas* or explained their customs, he would listen gravely and dismissed nothing with a smirk or a joke.

Thus his tryst with Tamil Hinduism began with inter-religious dialogue. In this phase of his life it filled up his days. His relations became specially warm with a number of young men who dropped in at any hour of the day. Though he was dignified they found him close to them. They chatted untiringly with him, questioning him, explaining their customs and etiquette and warning him against false steps. This was not a neutral dialogue but a 'living to-

4 Richard DeSmet

gether'. They called him *Aiyer* (master of the house) and spoke of his house or chapel as 'our home', 'our temple'. He found that their lives and minds were pervaded by religion, an all-pervasive religion, indeed. They hardly spoke of anything else. From those kindhearted youths he learned what the books he studied could not give him, sensitivity to Tamil religiosity and a feeling of what was right in their eyes. He addressed them individually as *tambi* (little brother) and they felt he was their eldest brother. They occasionally corrected his Tamil in which he made such fast progress that his facility amazed his own tutor.¹⁰

His tutor began now to hold free conversations with him bringing forth his Śaiva theology. "He argues with me, wrote de Nobili on December 1, 1607, about God, rebirth, creation, etc. and, seeing that reason is not always on his side, he has begun to show himself more humble and respectful." (Note how Nobili establishes dialogue on the level of reason.)¹¹

In February 1607, Nobili yielding to the instances of his young friends had opened for them a course of religious instruction. They spoke of it with such enthusiasm that his tutor one day dropped in. He was delighted by the elegance of his pupil's Tamil but soon also with the clarity and logic of his exposition and he became absorbed by the doctrines he taught. He also perceived in Nobili's tone and bright eyes a *bhakta's* fervor but he resisted its attraction. He came back every day but to confront Father Robert with clever questions and solid bits from his extensive learning. For several weeks the catechetical class was enlivened by the thrusts and parries of those two learned men. On February 25, they met in a street and had a friendly talk. "We agreed," wrote de Nobili, "to go on studying our respective religions, and so we did during twenty days at the rate of four or five hours a day."¹²

To understand what then went on in the mind of Nobili with his confidence in the universal validity of reason and his articulate post-Tridentine Catholic worldview, and perhaps of his tutor with his training in *Nyāya* (logic) and religious metaphysical questions, we may turn to Clooney's analysis in a still unpublished paper. Both partners were receiving something new which their trained minds were actively

trying to discriminate through the following steps:

- 1) an *analytic* moment of sifting for the reasonable portions;
- 2) a *referential* moment, in which these reasonable portions were apportioned to the corresponding aspects of reality as each one thought he knew it;
- 3) a moment of *judgment*, in which the remainder was judged either merely local and not universally significant or not fully reasonable;
- 4) as they went along but also in conclusion, the moment of *enunciation* of the right view and right judgment in eminently clear reasonable language.¹³

This process, however, was not an academic or purely intellectual search. It was vitally open-ended. As Śāṅkarācārya shows when explaining *viveka* (discrimination) it terminates in a life-option. This may be preceded by stress, prevented by prejudices, hampered by social bonds or loyalties. But in this case, prejudices had already been shed, Nobili was presenting the Christian faith stripped of its parangi and largely of its European clothing (though not of its European formulation) and both partners were aiming further than at a mere rapprochement. Nobili intended full evangelization, his tutor his final salvation. Thus a fifth moment followed upon the above four:

[After twenty dates of such intense dialogue,] he declared himself satisfied on all points and asked me to baptize him, which I did with great joy, for he was the first in this city to hear the truth and embrace it. I gave him the name of Albert.¹⁴

As to Nobili, he was strengthened by this experience in his reading about the Tamil religious tenets and customs which he would enlarge through many more encounters and hours of solitary study and present clearly in his books. Clooney who has read them in their original Tamil says:

His critique always distinguished between what he considered to be the basic soundness, humanity and potential for salvation that he felt were inherent in Indian culture, and the 'overlay' of

superstition and wrong ideas, which he condemned. He avoided sweeping attacks on the culture he saw around him, and always maintained the confidence that people can be persuaded, no matter how different they are from the missionary.¹⁵

In this he was in agreement with his Superior Provincial, Alberta Laerzio, and the Jesuit Archbishop of Cranganore, Francisco Ros, both of whom had approved him formally and supported him throughout the bitter controversy which arose precisely about this way of thinking and the inculturating policy he inaugurated.¹⁶ However, with notable exceptions, the conviction of the majority of his confreres was unfavourable to Indian religions and customs. For instance, his compatriot and contemporary, Jacobo Fenicio, who worked from 1583 to 1632, mainly in Calicut, had written an extensive description of the Hindu sects and legends of the Malabar region accompanied with adverse comments and appeals to morality and simple common sense. He was fluent in Malayalam and often encountered the Brahmins but in public disputations in which he not rarely triumphed but only to raise hostility. The knowledgeable J. Castets S. J. remarks: "Labour lost, as Father de Nobili has said and whose ample experience had demonstrated that nothing was more futile and even dangerous than such polemical refutations." I may add: even though Fenicio ridiculed those legends through numerous quotations from the Malayali poet Pacunar or Pākkānār.¹⁷

Nobili, his December, 1607, letter already quoted from, described the topics and the progress of his dialogue with his Shaiva tutor. This is of great interest but can be found in V. Cronin, *A Pearl to India* (totally based on Saulière), pp. 61-66.

Naturally, several of the young men who frequented him followed in the footsteps of Albert. And many people came to get acquainted with their *guru*, the Roman saṅnyāsi. But their questions were often futile whereas what he wanted was religious dialogue. He had to make this clear (as we know from the same letter):

As I do not want to waste my time. I have told them clearly that, except for

questions and arguments regarding the soul, I do not wish to treat of any other philosophical subject. This has proved very useful to me, for these people being very curious, are now asking only such questions as I desire, that is, on religion.

Later on, when he was already used to be called *Sattiya Podagar*, the awakener to truth, or *Tattuva Podagar*, to essential reality, he described four types of visitors in the first dialogue of his *Akkiyāna Nivāraṇam*. They are five in his *Dūṣana Dhikkāram*, ch. 29:

The *first* class are those who, because they think that their livelihood and other advantages may suffer, conceive a hatred against the truly revealed religion, and come to the spiritual teacher only to find fault with and abuse his doctrine.

The *second* class come merely to examine what is taught, and have not the least desire to be converted though they have no hatred against the truly revealed religion.

The *third* class, because of their sins, believe that heaven and hell and all that is beyond life are mere fancies, that the greatest happiness of man on earth is to seek and enjoy pleasure, wealth and honour, their sole object is, right or wrong, to amass as much of these as possible and enjoy them. Such sinners come to the spiritual teacher...simply to laugh at his doctrine.

The *fourth* class have no idea of finding fault with, examining or laughing at, the doctrine...but they come to him with the desire and hope of temporal advantages.

Finally, the *fifth* class are those who come with a strong determination to embrace the faith taught by the spiritual instructor if it proves true.¹⁸

Here is an instance from the first class: Some day in 1609, two hostile Brahmins came with the intention of trapping him into some objectionable statement. Their questions and his answers may be summarized as follows.

"What is your opinion regarding liberation and the means to reach it?"

He had just spent many months in intense study of their books with the impression that he was learning philosophy all over again. So he answered with arguments from their own

books which declared that liberation could not be obtained by practices but only by true knowledge. [Cf. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*]

"Very good. But how do you explain that men are born from unequal parentage?"

"I explain it through the analogy of the body the limbs and other parts of which are different but complementary. Remember the *Puruṣa sūkta* (the hymn of the Primeval Male) in your *R̥g Veda*." he added, "but all human souls are equal insofar as the Universal Lord (*Sarveśyaran*) is present in each."

"If this were true, all could see him with the eye of their intelligence and follow the same religion; moreover the Lord would share the sufferings of the souls!"

"See, the one sun is shining for us all but if I shut my door and window, I'll be in the dark. Our soul's door is shut against him by our sins but the *Sattīya Vedam*, the Religion of Truth, can open that door. Through its light, the Lord who is in us not only by his power but by his very essence can be known. But while present he remains transcendent. Our soul grieves when our body suffers pain because they form one composite whole. The Lord, however, does not form one composite whole with our soul. Hence, he is not affected by our sufferings."

"You spoke of sins and good actions. Why can we not obtain liberation through good actions?"

"Only good actions performed with true knowledge of the Lord and loving devotion towards him can liberate."

"Fire burns even the ignorant. Actions if good must of themselves liberate even the ignorant. Is this not true?"

"Actions, though apparently identical, may differ very much according to the intention, the motive of the will which inspires them. Let me add to this explanation the definition of sin: sin consists in turning away from God to embrace a bad and forbidden object."

He then supported this definition with texts from Sanskrit books and the two Brahmins left, declaring themselves satisfied. Nevertheless, their hostility had not been disarmed and they started an agitation to get him and Albert expelled from Madurai.¹⁹

It is interesting to see how Nobili infused eirenicism within this dialogue by meeting their entrapping questions with serenity and leading them through Sanskrit quotations they knew to agreeing with him at least intellectually though he could not win their goodwill. This, he remarked, depends on divine grace.

Let me now give instances of the second class: of neutral investigators. In 1610, during the agitation initiated by those two Brahmins, first, a very learned scholar, the supreme judge of the Left Hand castes (of artisans and traders) came to examine Nobili about some complaint. However, he had not espoused it, introduced himself very respectfully, listened soon with manifested interest, exchanged quotations of Sanskrit verses with the Aiyer and retired with a friendly promise to come again.

Next came another Brahmin, reputed to be the most learned in Madurai, who was also very rich and influential for he spent several hours daily with the *Nāyak* (Governor) of the city. Apparently offended by the porter's slowness to welcome him, he entered the Aiyer's room and proudly sat before being invited to do it. But then he sent away everyone else and began a courteous enquiry about the complaints spread against Nobili. He quickly understood that the learned *saṅnyāsī* was no *Parangi* and went on with questions which interested him personally:

"What is *Gñāna* (Knowledge)?"

"It is that knowledge which teaches the true nature of the Lord of all, of the soul, and of the returning path to Him."

"What is the nature of the Lord of all?"

Nobili enumerated the negative concepts which point to the Lord as beyond any creaturely characteristic.

"But are there not positive characteristics of the Lord?"

"Yes, He is *svayambhū*, self-existent, hence, unique; no other Lord exists that could have produced Him. He is infinitely powerful, hence, cannot be harmed; infinitely good, hence, cannot sin; supreme spirit, hence, bodiless; perfectly immense and omnipresent."

"How can He be located everywhere if He has no body?"

"If a man thinks that the Lord is everywhere like a cream in milk and butter in cream,

he may be a good shepherd or milkman but certainly not a good philosopher who would understand that the Lord is present by his essence wherever He is active by his infinite power." The comparison made the Brahmin laugh.

"Is Chokanātha, the god of our temple, an *avatāra* (descent) of the unique Lord?"

"How could he be? Are not sinful deeds attributed to him in the Purāṇas that concern him?"

It was time for the Brahmin to go to the Nāyak and he declared himself satisfied. Then suddenly he addressed the Aiyer in insolent language, faulting him for not esteeming Brahmins as gods on earth. "What will you do if I insult and slap you? Will you keep mild like a true *saṅnyāsi*?" The Aiyer said, "I have no reason to act otherwise than I teach others to do." Then the Brahmin took his leave begging him not to take amiss what he had done to test him.²⁰

This encounter had been, more than a testing, a converging towards true knowledge. The Brahmin had controlled, confirmed or corrected and increased his theological learning. Nobili had felt that he was once more meeting a man of parallel intelligence and training, at home in Logic and in the subtleties which accompanied any deep and consistent philosophy of God.

That Brahmin came back, this time quite friendly, with four Brahmins who were to carry on the discussion while he listened attentively. Afterwards, he took the Aiyer apart and told him he had lost confidence in his former teachers and wished to attend his lectures.²¹

Finally, let us take an instance of the fifth class. Another well educated Brahmin of thirty was intensely earnest. He came regularly for two months and a half to discuss the same kind of philosophical topics concerning God and the soul before feeling satisfied. But when they passed on to the mysteries of the Christian faith, he was all at sea because he could not reach them through rational proofs. When Nobili told him they could only be accepted by faith, he was taken aback. However, being eager for salvation, "he went on proposing his difficulties with great modesty and, finally, being convinced of the necessity of submitting his

intellect to God, he asked with great earnestness to be admitted to baptism."²² Nobili, however, made him wait till his faith became stronger. But that man gave rapidly such evident signs of humility, simplicity and lively faith that he could be baptized on August 15, 1610.

Nobili was a clear narrator. His letters are replete with accounts of interreligious dialogue. As the number of Christians increased, their enthusiasm for him became contagious. Their own conversations arose interest and they often brought him people whose minds they had already disposed to hope for salvation. Thus the number of inquirers of the fifth class became predominant. But there was no lack of others, even of the first and third class. Let me quote from a much later letter, his detailed account, dated November 27, 1627, of the events of that year. From July 1623, he had extended his apostolate to Tiruchirapalli, Sendamangalam, Salem and Moramangalam. There a Paraiyah who was yet the learned *guru* or *Pandāram* of 2,000 Shaiva disciples approached him, moved by the reading of one of his books, and after many hours of daily enquiry convinced Nobili to baptize him. He received the name of Mutudaiyan (Hilary) and, henceforth, became the most zealous recruiter of low-caste people to the Christian faith.

Reaching Tiruchi again in 1627, Nobili got a lodging in the very centre of the city. Hindus "came in such large numbers...that they did not leave me free for one moment. Some came with the intention of finding fault...; others with real concern for their salvation...[A noble soldier, attracted by the talk of a zealous Kammalar convert, insisted to be introduced by him.] I warned him that...to know thoroughly the truths he must believe, ...the virtues he must practice and...the remedies which God has given for the remission of sins...he needed...forty days of continuous study. He came every day...and I began to explain to him the attributes of God. [Of himself he drew the proper conclusion and we passed on to further topics.]

"Such is the method we follow...It is certainly better than to begin by attacking their gods and errors, for then they become hardened, and if they admit the truth it is rather to

blaspheme than to follow it. Moreover...God himself said [Exodus 22:28]: "Thou shall not speak against the gods." [And did not the apostle saint Thomas, according to Metaphrastus,] wait until he was asked what he was teaching...But let us return to our soldier. As he was intelligent he would deduce from the lessons he heard the truths he had to believe...[I told him:] 'The task of the guide is to show and explain the truth; you...must draw your conclusions as to what you must do; for this you do not require long explanations from me.' ...One day he told me that if, when I began, I had found fault with all the marks [of his Vaishnava sect] he would certainly have gone away and never come back."²³

Besides other cases, the same letter narrates a very interesting visit of a whole group of hostile Śaiva Pandārams and their disciples who invaded his hermitage when he was celebrating the Eucharist and began to throw questions at him. Soon his mildness and the pertinence of his replies calmed them and an intense and subtle discussion began. It lasted for many hours and they came back four days in succession for sittings of five hours each. I wish I could give here the details of this extensive dialogue²⁴ but it is time to conclude.

Nobili's best biographer, A. Saulière, wrote: "Visitors come to consult him on the most abstruse subjects. He discusses with them Causality, Unity of God, Eternity of the Cosmos, etc. and notes their Platonic outlook. He is full of admiration for the acuteness of their minds, and they for the lucidity of his explanations... These were so satisfactory and humane that every day new disciples would cling to him. His penitential and studious life was wholly devoted to them."²⁵

This is perhaps the most notable characteristic of his dialogical career. With him, dialogue was not occasional and intermittent. His whole life was dialogical. Together with his foreign habits, he had shed his foreign prejudices; while mastering the Tamil language, he had explored in depth its literature and harvested from it a rich crop of philosophical insights and religious beliefs. His prompt memory drew from it on any occasion in well understandable replies to his visitors' queries. He

was available almost every hour of the day and, at times, even at night.

Internally, his life was very unified. In his mind there was no separation between his loving interest in the Tamilian people, his scholarly exploration of their culture and religious traditions, his faith and his desire to evangelize. His practice of dialogue continued not seldom into catechetical instruction, but he was very patient and respectful of his visitors' rate of awakening to the truths he himself cherished and endeavoured to communicate. He was so convinced that each one must on his own reach his own conclusions that he always kept a distinction between the initial dialogue and the catechetical instruction which might or might not be requested by enquirers who had pursued the first for a long period. No one ever accused him of enforcing his faith upon unwilling people. To my mind, this delicate handling and this respect for other minds' freedom of decision is the most imitable feature of his dialogical activity.

Footnotes

- 1 Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1991, p. 241. In French: *Jésus Christ à la rencontre des religions*, Paris, Desclée, 1989, p. 313.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 226-229; French pp. 295-297.
- 3 John-Paul II, *Encyclical "Redemptoris Missio"*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991, Nos. 55-56, pp. 70-73.
- 4 Father Robert signed his letters indifferently as de Nobili or Nobili without the particle de. This practice is common with names of nobility.
- 5 A. Saulière, *The Life of Father Robert de Nobili, S. J. (1577-1656) from original and contemporary sources*, unpublished typescript, 2 volumes, Shenbaganur, Archives S.J., pp. 535, 537.
- 6 S. Rajamanickam, *The First Oriental Scholar*, Tirunelveli: St. Xavier's College, 1972, p. 16.
- 7 Francis X. Clooney, "Robert de Nobili. Adaptation and the Reasonable Interpretation of Religion," *Missiology: An International Review*, 18/1 (Jan. 1990) 31-32.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 9 A. Saulière, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-360.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 59-62.
- 11 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 63.
- 12 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 64.
- 13 F. X. Clooney, "Understanding Robert de Nobili's Reading of Hinduism," Draft (Oct. 28, 1990) of a forthcoming article, 4.

- 14 Quoted in Saulière, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- 15 F. X. Clooney, "Translating the Good: Robert de Nobili's Moral Argument and Jesuit Education Today," (forthcoming in *Jesuit Education in a Global Context*), 4.
- 16 See Angel Santos, *Francisco Ros, S.J., Arzobispo de Cranganore (1557-1624)*, Madras, 1948 or *Missionalia Hispanica*, 5 (1948) 325-393 and 6 (1949) 79-142.
- 17 Jacobo Fenicio, *Livro da Seita das Indios Orientales*, edited and introduced in English by Jarl Charpentier, Paris and Upsala, reviewed by J. Castets in *Revue d'histoire des missions*, XI (1934) 136-138.
- 18 Translated by S. Rajamanickam, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
- 19 Cf. A. Saulière, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-104.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 205-209.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 237.
- 23 S. Rajamanickam, "An Account of the Progress of the Madurai Mission During the Year 1627: A Letter of Robert de Nobili," *Indian Church History Review*, 11 (1977) 114-126, pp. 116-119.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 121-125.
- 25 A. Saulière, "Father Robert de Nobili S.J., the First European Indologist," in *Indica: The Indian Historical Research Institute Silver Jubilee Commemoration Volume*, Bombay, St. Xavier's College, 1953, 372-376, pp. 374-375.