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Book Reviews

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Order of Vaishnava monks (Vijay Pinch); and comparisons between Vivekananda and other significant leaders and thinkers: Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (Julius Lipner), two *sanatan dharma* propagandists in the Punjab (Kenneth Jones) and Govind Chandra Dev in East Bengal (Hiltrud Rustau). What the volume shows, says the editor, William Radice, is that for Vivekananda modernization meant both physical and mental reform. "His central project – uniting his work in India and the West – was to work out what in the religious traditions not only of India but of all countries and civilizations was valid and acceptable to modern scientific and

historical understanding: (ix). What should be preserved from the past and what should be discarded from the world's religions? These questions are as crucial today as they were a hundred years ago. Together with Rambachan's recent *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994), this book would provide the basis for an excellent graduate/senior undergraduate seminar on "Vivekananda and Hindu Reform".

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His Star in the East. Augustin Saulière, SJ. Revised and Re-edited by S. Rajamanickam, SJ. Madras: De Nobili Research Institute, 1995.

Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India. Ines G. Zupanov. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America 1542-1773. Gauvin Bailey. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

The Call of the Orient: A Response by Jesuits in the Sixteenth Century. Anthony D'Costa, SJ. Mumbai: Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, 1999.

ROBERTO DE NOBILI (1577-1656) was an Italian Jesuit priest who came to India in 1605, reaching the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu in November 1606. For most of the next 40 years he lived and worked there as a missionary. De Nobili is best remembered – and admired and criticized – for his willingness to adapt to Indian customs of dress, food, and manner of living. In his first years in Madurai, de Nobili put into practice the methods of adaptation for which he is famous. He simplified his dress, diet, and lifestyle and sought to follow the ascetic lifestyle of a Hindu renunciant. A talented linguist, he was one of first

Europeans to learn Tamil, and perhaps the first to write theological treatises in that (or any) Indian language. He also read Sanskrit, the classical language of Hindu India, and was perhaps the first European to read extensively in that language. He used his learning to establish contacts within the Hindu community and to win over converts, beginning in 1607. He hoped in this way to make his spiritual mission clear, win the attention of his desired audience, and remove the impression that Christianity was merely a foreign, Western religion. He was determined to show that the Christian faith, the one true religion, could flourish in India.

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He seems to have been rather successful too; Saulière cites de Nobili's contemporary Balthasar da Costa to the effect that by 1661 30,000 converts had been won over due to de Nobili's methods.

During de Nobili's lifetime, it was primarily other missionaries who criticized his accommodation of Indian culture, which they did not believe could be so smoothly disconnected from what we might summarize as Hinduism, and which they termed superstition, heathenism, or idolatry. After 1612 the intra-Christian controversy about his methods heated up, and he had to defend himself against vigorous Christian critics, beginning with his original Jesuit colleague in Madurai, Gonçalo Fernandes (1541-1619), who believed that de Nobili was seriously misunderstanding or misrepresenting Brahminism, and was far too tolerant in what he expected of converts. For ten years he was forbidden to accept converts into the culturally-sensitive form of Christianity he had devised. This controversy was not entirely without benefit, since it occasioned his articulation of the rationale for his missionary theory in three Latin treatises, the *Apology*, the *Narration*, and *Report on Certain Customs of the Indian Nation*. As for the Hindu reaction, we do not know much about the local response to de Nobili, since there seem to be no contemporary Hindu reports about him. He himself reports on extended theological arguments with pandits, and there were learned Brahmins, including those not interested in converting, who were willing to vouch for the validity of his understanding of their traditions. Saulière reports various controversies and altercations, but narrates them mainly in a rather hagiographical tone, i.e. as "the trials of the missionary". After the definitive papal approval of his methods in 1623, de Nobili built up the Madurai mission and was also able to travel to other parts of South India and Sri Lanka to establish new mission centres. During this period he wrote in Tamil his great *Refutation of Calumnies*, a thorough defence of the Christian teaching and way of life, and a multi-volume *Catechism*. Toward the end of his life his

health was in severe decline and he gradually went blind; he died in 1656 near the modern city of Chennai. Even today he is known by his Tamil title, *Tattuva Podagar*, "Teacher of Truth".

His Star in the East is by far the most detailed and substantial biography of de Nobili yet written. Fr Saulière made great use of the mission archives at the old Jesuit seminary in Shembaghanur, Tamil Nadu, and meticulously pulled together the documents on de Nobili (available in the 1950s) for as full as possible an account of his life. The book is therefore also a rich resource for the study of one of the earliest Catholic missions in India and for understanding the thinking and strategies of the early Jesuits there. The manuscript was already finished in 1955 and the major portion of it published in the Catholic periodical *New Leader* during 1956-1957, but Saulière himself never published it. He was apparently deterred by the financial failure of his earlier book on St John de Britto (a missionary and Christian martyr) and by his quarrel over scholarship and style with Vincent Cronin, whose *A Pearl to India* (1959) admittedly popularizes Saulière's research. Rajamanickam, a student of Saulière who in the 1960s and 1970s was himself the leading scholar on de Nobili, finally undertook in the 1990s to publish Saulière's work under the current title, correcting and updating it in light of more recent research (e.g. the discovery of de Nobili's Latin treatises), and adding useful appendices. We owe a great deal to Frs Saulière and Rajamanickam, but much remains to be done.

For most Indian Catholics, de Nobili represents a respected though rarefied ideal, but some see his accommodation of caste as too tolerant of unjust structures. Saulière never criticizes de Nobili and gives little sympathy to opponents, but insists, "Every Christian heart in this ancient land is a shrine to the honoured memory of *Tattuva Podagar*". (443) Fr Rajamanickam concludes his epilogue even more fervently:

no one has a better claim to be called a saint than Robert de Nobili, the *Tattuva Podagar*, the "Brahmin Sanyasi", "the

Wise and Holy man from the West", above all "His Star in the East", which led thousands of Indians to Jesus, the Saviour and "the expectation of the nations". (459)

Protestant writers, concerned about the purity and power of the Christian Gospel, have always been rather more inclined to see de Nobili's strategy of adaptation as too much of a compromise with Hinduism. Several recent Hindu writers have viewed de Nobili rather as a wolf in sheep's clothing – the missionary disguised as holy man, the author of a false Veda, and the inspiration for modern efforts to "conceal" Christian evangelization in Hindu appearances.¹

Both the hagiographical and negative estimations of de Nobili are at least premature, since even scholarly familiarity with him has remained incomplete. His extant writings, many of which were printed by S. Rajamanickam 30 years ago, are only slowly gaining attention, and only now are translations of his Tamil writings beginning to appear.² The majority of scholars have consulted at most the Latin treatises and a few of his letters. But Ines G. Supernova's *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India*³ is an important contribution to our understanding of de Nobili. More specific than the title would indicate, her significant archival research enables Zupanov to narrate and analyse de Nobili's dispute with Gonçalo Fernandes between 1610 and 1619, in the context of the widening involvement of a broader array of ecclesiastical figures. She explores the extant correspondence with great literary sensitivity and sophistication, fruitfully situates this Jesuit debate in India in the context of European epistolary, rhetorical, and hagiographical styles of composition, and draws our attention to the inevitable intrigue and political maneuvering that occurred as each side strove to gain support for its conclusions. Her fresh and illuminating approach reveals the complexity and ambiguity of de Nobili's project, and one

hopes that it will inaugurate a new generation of historical and cultural studies of the Catholic missionaries in India.

Two other books deserve brief mention. First, Gauvin Bailey's *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America (1580-1773)* devotes a full chapter to the ambitious Jesuit mission to the Mughal Court, a story fascinating in itself. His assessment of that mission in light of parallel developments in Japan, China, and Latin America vastly enriches our understanding of the common features of the Jesuit encounter with the cultures and religions of Asia and the America. Second, Anthony D'Costa's *The Call of the Orient: A Response by Jesuits in the Sixteenth Century* offers well-researched vignettes of 15 Jesuits contemporary to Francis Xavier in the mid-sixteenth century Goa mission. The best-known of these figures is Henrique Henriques, who became an expert in Tamil and composed some catechetical treatises in that language. The volume also valuably expands our sense of the corporate nature of the early Jesuit enterprise, while also giving a clearer context for the more famous Xavier and de Nobili.

Notes

1. For a contemporary Hindu critique of de Nobili, see Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashramas: Sannyasins or Swindlers?* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994), pp. 14-21. On theories about de Nobili's responsibility for a spurious Veda, see Ludo Rocher's introduction to *Ezourvedam: A French Veda of the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), especially pp. 30-42.
2. This reviewer, in collaboration with Anand Amaladass, SJ, is just now publishing *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, SJ, Missionary and Scholar in 17th Century India*. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000). This volume of translations makes several of de Nobili's Tamil-language treatises available in English for the first time.
3. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

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