



Book Review

Testing Ground for Jesuit Accommodation in Early Modern India: Francisco Ros SJ in Malabar (16th-17th Centuries). By Antony Mecherry, SJ. Bibliotheca Instituti Historici Societatis Iesu. Volume 79. Rome, 2019. I + 494 pp. ISBN: 978 88 7041 379 3. Price: € 60.

Antony Mecherry, SJ is a professor at the Pontifical Oriental Institute (Scienze ecclesiastiche orientale) in Rome, a rising scholar who promises to be for decades to come one of the leading historians of the Society of Jesus in India. Impressively detailed scholarship underlies the book, a mastery of sources in the required Western and Indian languages, including archival materials, letters and texts that have never been printed. It is a paradigm of meticulous scholarship, valuable even for its bibliography, which runs to thirty pages. The book makes a fresh contribution to familiar and much discussed issues with respect to Christianity in Asia. *Testing Ground for Jesuit Accommodation* is highly recommended for readers interested in nuancing the story of the arrival of Western Christianity in India, and in seeing the complexities of what the missionaries were up to.

The context is this. The early members of the Society of Jesus who reached Asia engaged in many pastoral, intellectual, economic and political activities. But aside from St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), those most remembered today were the missionary scholars among them. These were committed missionaries who were determined to understand the cultures around them, with the sensible view that they could communicate the Gospel successfully only if they understood those cultures, their languages, and social structures. They explored all available religious beliefs and practices, even if they were disposed from the start to dismiss the possibility that those beliefs were entirely true or practices entirely good. Figures such as Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) in Japan (but with jurisdiction over the mission across Asia), Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) in India, and Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) in Tibet were all pioneering figures in learning languages, reading indigenous texts, responding to the new cultures they encountered, and reshaping the practice and purpose of Christian mission.

De Nobili, the figure relevant for this review, became famous as an innovative scholar. He learned Tamil well enough to write books in the language and enough Sanskrit at least to read classic religious texts. He adapted his clothing, diet, and way of life to be more acceptable to Brahmins, since he was convinced that only

by winning converts among the Brahmins would the Jesuits have much chance of a steady and enduring mission among the rest of the south India population. Conversion was his goal, and for that purpose, he was as innovative as he could be. By his adaptations many of the obstacles to mission were removed, and he was able to win friends among the local intellectuals, but also to engage Brahmin intellectuals in discussion and debate, often in fierce arguments. De Nobili was successful in making many converts, and in establishing a high caste mission alongside the wider Catholic and Jesuit mission to fishermen and villagers often of much lower castes or Dalit identities. Nevertheless, other missionaries, including many Jesuits and Church officials in Goa, were uncomfortable with his strategy. While de Nobili traced his methods to the early Church's adaptation to Roman culture, some accused him of watering down the Gospel, catering to paganism, or even becoming an idolater himself.

The general story of de Nobili is well known, but Antony Mecherry SJ makes a welcome fresh contribution by reassessing de Nobili's missionary strategies against the background of intra-Christian debates in the generation preceding his arrival in India. He does this by linking the story of accommodating Brahmins with the other great challenge that came with the arrival of Western, Latin-rite Christians in India: the difficult relationship with the older Syriac Christian churches — "the Malabar Church," the churches of the Mar Thoma Christians tracing themselves back to Thomas the Apostle — established in West India long before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. One approach of the powerful and aggressive Western Catholics arriving in India was impatiently to marginalize the older forms of Christianity, forcing the Syriac churches to become Roman Catholic in liturgical language and ritual form. On occasion, this reformation was implemented by brute force. A quite different approach was accommodation, the fashioning of ways for the two Christian traditions to live in harmony: unified in faith and doctrine, but distinct in what were judged to be cultural factors.

While accommodation thus had to do with varying ways of being Christian — in unity, with some differences — the analogy had an unanticipated life of its own. That is, the reasoning goes, if the Catholic Church could accommodate Syriac Christians by allowing cultural differences without demolishing Christian unity, then the same surely could be done with Brahmins as well, for the sake of conversion: "While the Brahmin Christians wanted to retain their cultural symbols after their conversion to Christianity, the Thomas Christians wanted to maintain their ancient traditions after their formal union with the Catholic Church, sharing at the same time common cultural rites that in a way protected their caste identity" (xiii-xiv). For both Thomas Christians and Brahmins, "caste identity remained independent of their religious allegiance" (xiv). de Nobili's key contribution was to appropriate "the existence of the Thomas Christians in that cultural field as an effective case in point to prove the feasibility of his accommodation among the non-Christians, who did not want by any means to

lose their shared cultural identity" (xiv). As Mecherry sees it, it makes sense to see the mission to the non-Christians of south India as extending the accommodation exercised with respect to the Malabar Christians. He very meticulously builds his case over the first four chapters, in the concluding chapter offering a brilliant recontextualization of de Nobili's mission.

Mecherry's special focus is on one of de Nobili's greatest supporters, Archbishop Francisco Ros (1559-1624). Ros is frequently mentioned in books about de Nobili, but never until this book has he been the center of attention. Ros was a Catalanian from the Jesuit province of Aragón who arrived in India in 1584. In 1599, he was appointed the first Latin bishop of Angamaly. Mecherry does ground-breaking work on Ros and on the controversies around Roman Catholic-Syriac Christian relations and he gives us a fresh and new perspective on the basis of which to think about de Nobili, and the inspiration for his mission.

I mentioned that de Nobili and others were famed for their missionary scholarship. But Mecherry modifies the frame of that learning. He asserts that it is for the sake of missionary accommodation, not for the sake of a more modern quest for mutual understanding for its own sake: "although Jesuit accommodation in mission is often treated as a question of profound knowledge and exchange of languages and cultures required of the missionaries, it was, in fact, a mission method by which the Jesuits in their respective mission lands tried to ensure either conversion or reconversion of the local people to Catholicism" (xvi). According to Mecherry, this means that "knowledge for its own sake" is not the goal, nor is interreligious understanding. But "deeper knowledge of the mission and its languages" mattered in that it helped missionaries "to comprehend in detail the hidden and interwoven dynamics of the cultural and liturgical symbols of their respective mission arenas, which seemingly shared the same cultural traits" (81-82). This practical knowledge enabled them to sort out primary and secondary aspects of the traditions involved, and to interpret old practices and symbols in a way that would allow them to be maintained by converts to Christianity. This strategy is already clear and explicit in de Nobili's own treatises, which appeal more to the model of Christian accommodation in ancient Rome rather than the negotiations between Roman and Malabar Christians. But Mecherry is convincing in noticing that the same manner of inquiry and same balancing act are operative first in the Catholic-Syriac encounter, and then in the Catholic-Brahmin encounter. It is this parallel which surely would have caught the attention of everyone involved in the debates over adaptation. Learning to treat the churches of the East with respect and tolerance created a disposition to go as far as possible in honoring the other religious cultures encountered in India. What is still needed, of course, is a review of all these issues from Indian and Hindu perspectives, as concerned observers watched the Portuguese and their missionaries do their work in two different but obviously connected contexts.

Mecherry clearly admires Ros and appreciates his responsible efforts to work out the Malabar-Roman relationship even while also defending de Nobili's experiment. But as a historian, he does not want to take sides too strongly: "This book neither makes a moral judgement upon nor advocates for Jesuit accommodation. Conversely, it tries to address, without judging the agents or the opponents of this mission approach, the underlying reasons that prompted Jesuits such as Francisco Ros and Roberto de Nobili to embrace a different praxis of accommodation in South India that apparently led their companions in mission to employ a spirit of participation in the customs and symbols of their respective mission field" (xvi). At the same time, he is sympathetic too with de Nobili's opponents, who saw accommodation with Syriac Christians as vastly different from accommodation with pagan Brahmins, a step too far. Indeed, Mecherry is also providing the grounds for a more traditionalist reading of de Nobili: no longer a radical prophet of interreligious dialogue or even an early religious pluralist, but rather a more traditional missionary who insightfully extended a mode of Christian accommodation into the uncharted territory of the Catholic-Brahmin encounter. There is a tone of disappointment to one of Mecherry's few comments on the contemporary strategy of adaptation in India: "In fact, the present-day endeavours of evangelization, practised especially in a multireligious and multicultural context, disregard accommodation as a mission method, tending to focus, instead, on the approach of inculturation and interculturalism as guiding principles in the process of promoting faith and justice..." (xvi). My guess is that Mecherry is really defending accommodation as the better, more faithful, and more modest strategy that Catholics and Jesuits in India should still follow today.

In the end, *Testing Ground for Jesuit Accommodation* proves to be interesting for a range of reasons. It sheds new light on Christian mission in India and reshapes our thinking about a key early period in the Western arrival in India; it connects the history of Christian encounters in Western India with interreligious encounters in south India, events and controversies most often considered in isolation from one another. It sheds fresh light on both the genius and indebtedness of Roberto de Nobili's new missionary method. Readers of this volume will realize that Christian mission in the colonial era was a complicated affair, that even its defenders found it difficult to explain and implement. The stage is now set for further, nuanced studies by Hindu scholars of Christian mission seen in light of this particular history.

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