

The Jesuit Strategy of Accommodation¹

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At the heart of their global enterprise to save souls lay the Jesuits' strategy of accommodation. They contrived to fashion any aspect of a message that would increase the receptivity of their audience to the Christian truth. In China they dressed as Confucian Mandarins. In Flanders they adapted the picture signs from farmers' almanacs that would make it easy for illiterate peasants to learn Christian doctrine. In Peru the Jesuits encouraged the altered use of Inca quipu, memory devices tied from string knotted in different lengths and colors, as the means to recall the sins necessary to divulge for a good confession.

At a more fundamental level, throughout the world the Jesuits pioneered in systematizing the knowledge of languages in grammars, dictionaries, and writing conventions, as they recognized that they could win souls only if they preached, heard confession, and wrote in Japanese, Tamil, or Quechua. Every time they entered a new place they analyzed the local power structure and economy to plan approaches best suited to establishing a secure position for saving souls. Music, food, dances, etiquette, architecture, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, pictures, philosophy, law—all areas of knowledge were learned and accommodated to every place and circumstance. Now, at this moment, in our expanding digital world of global knowledge, the Jesuits' extraordinary achievement immediately attracts attention to what we think might be an early modern reflection of our own understandings.

During the last three decades historians, art historians, linguists, musicologists, and anthropologists have scrutinized Jesuit interaction with people of every kind across the world from many different vantage points of method and agenda. Detailed studies have been devoted to everything and everywhere. In recent years broader, comparative and synthetic essays have connected Jesuit missions back to the center in Rome, to local hubs of activity in a global network, and to new directions for research. But the field remains fragmented by cross-purposes of assumption, willful or unintended mutual ignorance, and the constraints of specialization that prevent one subfield from seeing

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the other. This paper traces the ruptures that divide, examines some of what I have found to be the most useful recent contributions, and considers whether a unified understanding is possible at this juncture. It seems to me that for the purposes of Jesuit image theory, the question is fundamental.

Theoretical Elements of Accommodation in the Practice of Roberto de Nobili as an Introduction to Key Issues

But accommodation developed as a strategic practice and not as a theory. No single document or treatise ever set down its principles in full. Roberto de Nobili, who came closest, sent his manuscript report on Indian customs (1613, published 1972) to win support from the Superior General for controversial practices that De Nobili already had introduced into the mission at Madurai.² Necessity spurred him on. He cobbled together arguments drawn from the Bible, Plutarch, Augustine, Jesuit precedent, Aristotle, Aquinas, Brahmin texts, and experience in the field. De Nobili started with political analysis. His mission worked far from the Portuguese centers of trade, in a region where Indian princes ruled, and would succeed only by means of persuasion through accommodation. Evangelization of all lower castes depended on converting the Brahmins whom everyone else followed, and the Brahmins would convert only if they could continue to display the caste signs that assured their superior status. Caste signs originated in social and civic customs, so that any sacred meaning attached to them could be construed as 'accidental'. By drawing that distinction between form, which was essential, and accident, which was superficial, the Jesuits could argue for the acceptance into Catholic practice of many rituals and customs that others considered superstitious or sacrilegious.³

Accident pertained to superficial appearance and so could be manipulated to project different images that would increase the Jesuits' opportunity to save souls while leaving intact their own immortal souls. De Nobili applied this logic to defend Jesuit preachers who perfumed themselves with fragrance of sandalwood:⁴

2 Nobili R. de, S.J., *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, S.J., Missionary and Scholar in 17th Century India*, trans. and ed. A. Amaladass, S.J. – F.X. Clooney, S.J. (St. Louis: 2000).

3 Ibidem 217–220.

4 Ibidem 177–178.