

Contextualization: A New-Old Idea Illustrations from the Life of an Italian Jesuit in 17th-Century India

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For the past fifteen years “contextualization” has been the buzzword in mission circles. Any “doing” of theology must naturally incorporate aspects of contextualization in the process. In the following article Todd M. Johnson, in his evaluation of the 17th-century Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili, shows that contextualization itself, although a relatively new word, is certainly not a new concept. De Nobili is but one of myriad examples of missionaries throughout the centuries who successfully “did theology.” Consequently, he, and they, are good role models for us today who follow in their footsteps.



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few short years ago, in 1972, Shoki Coe first used the term “contextualization” in a publication of the World Council of Churches. This report contended that contextualization is different than the earlier concepts of indigenization or accommodation and that it takes into account “the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice which characterized the historical moment of nations in the Third World” (1972:20).

However new the term contextualization is, the practice itself is very old. The Apostle Paul had cultural sensitivities that led him to contextualize the gospel in every situation he encountered. Perhaps he more than any other person was responsible for hundreds of indigenous theologies in the first and second centuries among newly converted Gentiles. Most of us would be willing to agree that Paul “knew about” contextualization, but we might contend that between his time and ours was the “Great Apostasy” that lasted from A.D. 150 to A.D. 1950. Surely nothing good could have happened in that period in relation to contextualization and missions!

Nothing could be further from the truth. Patrick planted an Irish (Celtic) church that was thoroughly contextualized. His spiritual children later established the island of Iona as a missionary sending base from which thousands of Celtic *peregrini* (missionaries) traveled to the farthest reaches of the Continent. Hundreds of years later, while in the midst of a military crisis,

Alfred the Great translated the liturgy of the church into the language of the common people—a strategic action which would foster new indigenous theology that wasn't possible in Latin. Later, Franciscans, even in their avowed simplicity, adapted to the peoples among whom they ministered; they actively sought to make theology local and practical everywhere they traveled. Francis himself developed a sorely needed theology of compassion and joy in a medieval world of cruelty and fear. As time marched on, hundreds of missionaries with deep cross-cultural sensitivities managed to bring a digestible gospel to the various tribes of Europe so that the continent was thoroughly saturated with the Good News before the dawn of the Reformation.

Most Protestant eyes are loyally fixed on Martin Luther, who posted his famous theses in 1517. But unfortunately, the Reformation had little impact in the realm of missions; only a handful of Protestant missionaries went out in the 250 years following Luther's courageous act. The famous Baptist historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, summarized the situation succinctly: "Between 1500 and 1750 the geographic spread of Christianity was mainly through Roman Catholics" (1953:924). This expansion was greatly facilitated by the founding of the Jesuits in 1534. In fact, the English word "mission," which is technically used today to mean foreign missions, actually originated from the fourth vow of the Jesuits.

From the inception of the Jesuits, cross-cultural outreach had a special place in the lives of its members. The next 200 years of missions history was to a large degree written by them. Bishop Stephen Neill writes, "Within the next hundred years Jesuits were to lay their bones in almost every country of the known world and on the shores of almost every sea" (1964:148). The great missionaries of the Church before Carey, Judson and Taylor were Jesuits like Xavier, Valignano, Ricci and Nobili. These early Jesuits often possessed amazing cross-cultural sensitivities, and this was especially true of Roberto de Nobili.

Nobili's Background

Roberto de Nobili was born in 1577 into a very wealthy family with great influence in the church of Rome. He was related to two popes and was destined for greatness, but in the midst of his years as a student he gave up all this to join the Society of Jesus. Nevertheless, as a young Jesuit, his studies

did not suffer; required topics included logic, science, astronomy, metaphysics, psychology, and ethics.

When Nobili first arrived in India, he was surrounded by beautiful Portuguese libraries and churches. Even when he was sent to eastern India to study Tamil, he was still on well-worked soil. Then, a year later, his superior changed his mind about where Nobili should work.

Too long, he decided, had conversion been made in the islands and along the beaches, protected, if necessary, by Portuguese guns. The time had come for the cross to outstrip the flag. The walls of India—what were they but fear of the unknown. The time had come for someone to penetrate the interior and convert those living in the heart of Southern India. The man Laerzio had chosen for this experiment was Roberto de Nobili (Cronin, 1959:34).

Nobili's Crucial Observations

Nobili went straight to Madurai, where another Jesuit had been working for eleven years. Nobili very quickly noticed that all his colleague's converts were either fishermen from the coast or Portuguese; not a single one was a native of Madurai. His keen mind began to search for the reason for this and in a few weeks discovered the shocking truth: the Hindus had been watching the foreigners carefully to determine what caste they were from, and after repeatedly observing them eat meat and associate with low-caste people had labeled them "Parangi" or "those who have horses and guns," a term referring to low caste. The Portuguese, including the Jesuits, were happy to wear this label since they believed it to merely be a Tamil translation of the word "Portuguese." The Jesuits had made a further mistake by referring to their religion as that of the "Parangi." To the average Hindu this could mean only one thing: to become a Christian you had to renounce caste and eat meat. For this reason there were no caste Hindu converts in Madurai.

Nobili also noticed that several groups of Hindu men lived austere and harsh lives in devotion to their gods. They were from all castes but were highly respected by everyone because they had renounced their lives and practiced simplicity. These were called the sannyasis. After some time Nobili decided to seek to become a sannyasi to reach all who could not bring themselves to forsake caste.

In making this sort of decision, Nobili faced a great deal of Portuguese opposition in extricating himself from the stigmas associated with Parangi. If not for the bold insight of his su-

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perior Laerzio, he would have never had the opportunity to take risks and accept the challenges that would later make him famous. He began diligently searching for a way in which he could identify more closely with the Indians and their caste system. As he became less “Parangi,” a few higher-caste Hindus began to visit him.

Nobili’s innate courtesy and kindness made them feel at home. He spoke well, without any mixture of Portuguese, and he said things worth hearing. He listened too with close interest to what they had to say. When they narrated to him their Puranic stories he would never brush them aside with a contemptuous “Nonsense”.... He was struck by their deep sense of religion. With them religion was not a cloak which they only occasionally put on. It was ingrained in their very life, in their thoughts, in their words and in every action (Cronin, 1959:52).

Nobili’s royal Italian heritage allowed him to present himself as a Roman “raja,” a member of a ruling caste that Indians could understand. When his Hindu friends heard that he was actually a raja, they broadcast the news and showed a new eagerness to accept him. Nobili was slowly being stripped of the Parangi stigma.

Nobili was no longer associated in Indian minds with a polluting Parangi. He continued scrupulously to observe the rules of the Raja caste. For a time nothing happened. Then men of the three highest castes—the best educated Madurai—began to come and speak to Nobili: at first only one or two, at rare intervals, then in groups. Those who had formerly spat contemptuously as he passed or uttered a pious prayer to avert ill omen now came to see him in a friendly spirit (Cronin, 1959:57).

Thus Nobili entered a whole new perspective from which he began to see India from the inside out. He soon became aware of the fact that his raja status separated him from the Brahmins whom he most wanted to reach. Another step would be necessary for him to get close to the Brahmins, and for this he had to seek the advice of Hindus. He returned to his desire to live the life of a sannyasi. He remembered that the sannyasis he admired were respected by all castes. Even as a raja, if Nobili forsook all and became a sannyasi, he would be able to share truth with Brahmins.

He therefore put on the garb of a Hindu sannyasi, the

ocher-colored robe, the wooden slippers, the sandalwood paste on his forehead, in hand the staff and water jug customary among Hindu ascetics. He built a little hut for himself and lived there in utter seclusion, avoiding the company of Fernandes, the Feringhee missionary, and refusing to have anything to do with his Christians. He avoided eating meat and drinking alcohol, and secured the services of a Brahmin servant and cook. This fact made it clear to those who watched him that he was not an outcaste or pariah but a man of superior caste (Burke, 1957:111).

However, the Portuguese were not as understanding of Nobili's actions as the Hindus. As a result, soon after becoming a sannyasi, Nobili had to leave the mission compound and move into a hermitage. Even his fellow Jesuits began to mock him, but still Nobili received support from his superiors.

Nobili Enters the Worldview of the Hindus

As a sannyasi Nobili was expected to study hard and teach others the ways to the truth. Since he deeply desired to know the Hindu religion, this was precisely the break Nobili was looking for, and his disciplined study quickly began to bear fruit.

The Father speaks the purest Tamil and pronounces it so well that even the most fastidious Brahmin scholars cannot improve on his diction. He has already read many books, and learned by heart the essential passages of their laws as well as many verses of their most famous poets, who are held among them in great honour. Many are the hymns he has learned by heart, and he sings them with such perfection and grace that all listen to him with pleasure and unconcealed admiration (Cronin, 1959:81).

A formidable obstacle still prevented Nobili from really understanding the Hindu mind. Most of the ancient texts were in Sanskrit, and it was forbidden for any non-Brahmin to study Sanskrit. Even as a sannyasi, Nobili was barred from possessing the key that would unlock the Hindu scriptures. By providence, Nobili found a scholar who would teach him Sanskrit, and even at the risk of his life this scholar gave Nobili a copy of the Vedas. Nobili at once set out to learn them and began using them to convince Hindus of the one true God. Once Nobili understood the basic foundations of Hinduism, he was free to measure the lives of Hindus by their own standards and

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then introduce the true way.

I take occasion to tell them that they are indeed mistaken if they think they can be saved by any of those three laws and I proceed to prove it to them by the very words of their books. As they are most anxious to save their souls, for which they undertake various works of penance and alms-giving, I tell them that I have come from a distant country for the sole purpose of teaching them that law which is said to have been lost. Thus I adapt myself to their ideas just as Saint Paul adapted himself to the ideas of the Athenians, regarding the unknown God (Cronin 1959:90).

The more Nobili learned from the Vedas, the more he debated with Hindus, often using the very strengths of Hinduism to lead them to the cross. He also adapted the teachings of the church fathers and Western philosophers to give Hindus keys to some foundational propositions on which Christianity stood. And yet for all the debates he held and all the booklets he wrote, it was primarily his love and gentle spirit that touched the hearts of his hearers.

He was committed to spreading the Catholic faith, not a system of European philosophy. Nevertheless, to preserve the faith intact, it would be necessary to retain certain basic apprehensions (for example, about the nature of divine love and of the soul) not normally perceived in India and, indeed, to communicate them. The comparatively easy task of becoming in all ways Indian was not open to Nobili. He must communicate those basic apprehensions not only, or even chiefly, by verbal arguments but, under God, by a good life, for Indians expected of a guru not so much information as transformation of character. Grace in him must act out the truth of his apprehensions. Between Rome and Madurai he himself must become a bridge of love (Cronin, 1959:95-96).

The way of life Nobili had chosen was a very crucial part of his contextualization. As a good sannyasi, he won the hearts of those who knew him. They saw his simple lifestyle and the commitment he lived out to the one true God. At crucial junctures in the growth of his high-caste church, the Lord used him to convince many of the Europeans that certain symbols used by the Brahmins were more cultural than religious. Thus, for example, the converts were allowed to retain the thread they received as young men and the tuft of hair signify-

ing their caste. (The loss of either would have been a major obstacle to their conversion.) Nobili clearly saw how much more open Brahmins would be to the gospel if they were allowed to retain their caste identity. In the baptism of his first Brahmin convert Nobili gained a major victory:

The baptism of Sivadarma was the culmination of eighteen months' work, during which the Sanskrit master had become the Christian pupil. Nobili could well look at his Brahmin with satisfaction. A few Brahmins had been baptized in Portuguese territory, but for motives of gain, and in receiving baptism they had ceased to be Brahmins. The thread had been ripped from their shoulders, and with it their caste: they wore trousers and a hat and ate Portuguese food, they spoke the language of their masters. Forced to ape the Portuguese, they had ceased to be Indians. But Sivadarma was a true Brahmin and a true Christian; he bore a Tamil name, not one borrowed from a Portuguese godfather, and he would continue to speak his own language. The waters of baptism had washed away his sins, not his colour, nor his nationality, nor all that was good in his former way of life (Cronin, 1959:110).

Every time a cultural or religious issue confronted the new church Nobili had planted, he comprehensively studied all that the Christian and Hindu scriptures had to say. Before making a final decision, he also considered the social impact it might have in the Hindu community. One issue was the Hindu festival of Pongal.

"The Hindus," writes Nobili to Laerzio of the Pongal in 1609, "are accustomed, at the beginning of each year, to celebrate a very solemn festival, called Pongal, to offer the new rice to the gods. It consists in cooking with great ceremony their rice mixed with milk, before an idol. According to them, it is a disgrace not to be able to celebrate that festival. I allow our Christians to cook their rice and boil their milk at the foot of a Cross which they plant for the purpose and, to their great satisfaction, I myself bless the new rice which is to be used in the ceremony" (Cronin, 1959:116).

Nobili developed an ecclesiology that constantly examined the issues in light of the present context of society. He did not use a dialectical approach but rather started first with Scripture and then moved to the context.

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The thing to do was to purify harmless customs of any superstitious taint and, wherever possible, redirect them towards the true God: to bring Christianity to the Indians, not as a way of life imported by the Parangis from Europe, but as the crown of all that was best in India. Acting on this principle, Nobili had to decide which customs were not essentially superstitious and could be tolerated. Since he was the only European with knowledge of the Vedas, he had to look for the evidence himself, then submit it to his superiors for their decision. But all this time his own knowledge was steadily growing. As he made new discoveries or as conditions changed, so Nobili adapted his own way of life. Now he grows a beard, now he shaves; on one occasion he rides in a palanquin, on another he makes a hundred and fifty mile journey on foot. One picture shows him with earrings, another without them (Cronin, 1959:118).

Nobili chose to take on the name “Tattuva Bodhakar” or “Teacher of Reality” for all his publications, which contained many insightful presentations of Christian truth.

Nobili’s View of the Indian Church

Early on Nobili noted that the growth of the Indian Church would be stunted if it depended on foreigners for its sustenance. Therefore, it wasn’t long before he devised a bold plan to raise up hundreds of indigenous leaders.

Nobili wanted to train seminarists [sic] who, having preserved their Indian customs and their castes, would be respected by their Hindu countrymen, to whom they could speak on equal terms. He wanted his future priests to present Christianity to the Indian people in their own languages, not in a jargon in which all religious terms were Portuguese; to be well trained in Christian theology but also experts in the religion of the Hindus around him; to depend for support and protection on their own countrymen, not on foreigners. In the first half of the seventeenth century such a plan was extremely bold and farsighted (Cronin, 1959:168).

Nobili believed—and acted on his belief—that books conceived and written in the Indian languages (not mere translations) were absolutely indispensable to a “truly” Indian Church. His own books, written from the perspective of someone who deeply understood the Vedas and the Hindu

worldview, paved the way for all sorts of indigenous innovations. Indian Christians wrote their own worship songs and liturgies, they published books and tracts, and they willingly faced up to the social issues of the day.

Nobili's Greatest Opposition

Throughout his ministry Nobili faced opposition from Brahmins and other Hindus, but his greatest problem was with the European church in Goa. Reports of his successes and failures were being debated as far away as Rome, but in Goa Nobili had many enemies.

Nobili, they cried, was the shame—the ineffaceable shame—of the missions; he complicated the simplicity of Christian truth, he deformed the method bequeathed by the apostles, mixing with it pagan rites and ceremonies; he was destroying the old traditions of the diocese of Goa; he was polluting the Gospel with specious emblems of caste; then, by frauds and deceits, insinuating this into the depths of men's hearts. Instead of giving them salutary and profitable advice, with his superstitious inventions he led the credulous minds of the Hindus into error and deception; he mixed together things profane and holy, earthly and heavenly, vile and excellent (Cronin, 1959:219).

In defense, Nobili wrote a comprehensive document that carefully outlined his position. It was entitled *An answer to the objections raised against the method used in the new Madurai Mission to convert pagans to Christ*. In this brilliant defense Nobili supported his actions with the history of contextualization. He cited the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and also an unusual document containing the instructions St. Gregory the Great sent to St. Augustine of England in the fifth century. After considering the conversion of the English, Gregory had written,

The temples of the idols of that nation ought not be destroyed. Let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples; let altars be erected and temples blessed. For if these temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of the devil to the service of the true God, so that the nation seeing that their temples are not destroyed... may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. And because they have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifice to the devils, some solemnity must be exchanged for them on this account.... They may build

themselves huts from the boughs of trees about the churches which were formerly temples, celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting and, and without offering beasts to the devil, kill cattle and praise God while eating them. It is impossible to efface everything at once from their obdurate minds (Houpert, 1940:42).

Nobili's methods eventually became known as the Malabar rites. Less than 60 years after his death, these rites were officially condemned by the church. Not until the twentieth century would their value be recognized once again.

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Conclusion

Nobili contextualized the gospel in three major ways:

1. He took on an identity that was genuine and one which the Indians could understand and respect. He placed himself within the caste system where he could gain a hearing.

2. He studied the religion of the people he was trying to reach and used his understanding of Hinduism to enhance his presentation of the gospel.

3. He did not alienate his converts from the church at large. He never spoke evil of the Parangis but rather allowed his converts to worship in the way that was natural to them and then made them understand that the Parangis were their brothers and sisters.

Today much that is written about contextualizing the gospel in Hindu cultures majors on understanding elements of Hindu religion. Writers struggle with Hindu concepts of *karma*, *maya*, and *avatar*. They look for keys in the Hindu emphasis on spirituality, and they wrestle with the numerous Hindu paths to truth. Nobili recognized these same things. On the one hand, he was unwilling to identify Jesus as an avatar because this obscured Christ's unique deity. On the other hand, he chose the Hindu concept of *bhakti-marga* to identify Christianity as the path of devotion. Nobili also wrote lengthy prose and poetry after the Hindu pattern. As the only Christian and perhaps only European who could read Sanskrit and the Vedas, he was able to identify crucial elements of Hindu religion and contextualize the gospel accordingly.

A famous illustration of Sadhu Sundar Singh tells of a Brahmin who was unwilling to take water from the cup of a lower-caste person. He then concludes, "It is the same with the Water of Life. Indians do need the Water of Life but not in the European cup." Thus, contextualization is also crucial in the areas of cultural forms and sociological groupings.

Nobili took this area as seriously as that of religion. Today many Indian and European writers decry the strategy of using caste as a bridge for the gospel. They claim that this approach promotes inequality in the body of Christ. Nobili saw how the “all Indians are equal” approach of the Portuguese effectively cut off the high castes from the gospel. Nobili became “all things to all men” to win the Brahmins. He saw the inequality of caste and at times also worked among lower-caste people. His main concern, however, was how to allow the Brahmins to worship Jesus within their own context.

Nobili was by no means perfect in his contextualization. He used Latin for his first Easter mass, and some of his services differed little from those he had experienced in his native Italy. On the other hand, Nobili always seemed to be looking for a way in which Hindus, especially those from high castes, would be comfortable with the gospel and able to express their Christianity in the context of their culture. By devoting his life to this pursuit, this Italian Jesuit brought more advances into the Catholic church’s understanding of what the indigenous church in India should look like than any before or perhaps after him. He was indeed an incarnational missionary in the fullest sense.

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