# Development of Theological Language in the Encounter with Cultures and Religions— Mission in the Case of Robert de Nobili (1606-1656)

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## Introductory Observations

In the history of mission in South India, I take up the development of theological language in the case of Robert de Nobili, an Italian missionary considered a pioneer in inculturation. It is also a critque of cultural nationalism. The theme of my presentation is "Theological language in the context of encounter with cultures and religions exemplified in the case of mission experiment of Robert de Nobili." My own area of specialisation and interest is Christian and religious ethics. My presentation has two parts: Part I deals with theological language generated by encounter with religions and cultures; and Part II deals with the case of de Nobili and his contribution to theological language. I hold that we can draw some lessons from the mission history de Nobili for development of theological language.

In our reflection we suppose some understanding of culture, religion, encounter, theology and language that goes with it. The context of our reflection is Indian and Asian. Here we have to note that Indian and Asian Christians who have been part of the cultural and religious traditions of India and Asia do not really encounter the cultures and religions of their country and the continent since they are, in an implicit sense, heirs to these traditions. This paper supposes some working understanding of culture, religion, and encounter, theology in Indian and Asian contexts and theological language that goes with it. Hence, there will be brief references to these definitions.

*Culture* is the complex whole of a people's beliefs, world views, values, customs, practices, wisdom traditions and moral wisdom, language, symbols, myths, art and other creations of people's skills. It is collective humanum of a people. It is a people's way of being human and interhuman in the totality of their life. In relation to culture, we can use the expression cultural humanum of a people.

We point to *religion* being concerned with ultimacy of meaning of life and purpose, belief in the absolute or the divine, and religion as the depth dimension of culture. In general we could say that culture and religion go together. This is true of Indian and Asian situation marked by religious and cultural pluralism.

We understand *encounter* as meeting in dialogical openness and relationship. Here we speak of Christianity in encounter with cultures and religions. We understand this encounter as encounter of people of India and Asia rooted in their cultural and religious traditions with the gospel. Similarly the missionaries who bring Christian faith to our lands encounter the people of India and Asia in their cultures and religions and offer it in the context of this encounter of dialogical relationship. This does not mean that we ignore the wrongs and

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mistakes done by missionaries often associated with the colonial project.

Since this deals with development of theological language, we need to make it clear for ourselves that *language* is the communicative reality of a people and culture. Hence, it is part of culture or we could say it is a cultural reality. This understanding is presupposed in our efforts at developing theological language. We could therefore affirm that theological language in our context is the **fruit of the encounter** with cultures and religions. In our context, theological language will bear marks of the multireligious and multicultural contextual nature of India and Asia.

Speaking of language as a cultural reality, we need to pay attention to the idiomatic genius of a people's language and its contextual wombs of the meanings and their nuances in the words, expressions, idioms, symbols, metaphors. The contextual wombs of people's experiences and struggles give rise to rich and multiple avatars of words and expressions and thus shape the theological language in Asia. Another important aspect of language and therefore of theological language is that the latter developing from encounter with religions and cultures is focused and purposed on effective relational communication. Moreover, we do theology for transformative praxis. Hence, our approach to theological language is more than academic.

Since theology starts from the experience of the life of people, the starting-point of theology is important and it is also is also the point of arrival for a renewed praxis. T.S. Eliot's words seem relevant:

> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And to know the place for the first time.[2]

The starting point of experience contains in its depth the seed of the point of arrival. I want to conclude the introductory observations with an additional statement that besides our attention to the idiomatic genius of a language of a people in the development of theological language we need to consider also the spirituality of a people's language. Peoples' use of words, expressions, symbols, metaphors, etc. in so far as they carry the meanings and beliefs shaped by their cultures and religions reflect and embody their spiritual resources that sustain them. This should be part of developing theological language in our context. This is a lesson we can learn from de Nobili's approach.

## Part I. Reflections on the Development of Theological Language in the Context of Encounter with Cultures and Religions

Theological language develops and evolves from continual encounter and dialogue with cultures and religions of the people of the country and the continent and from the dusty soil of people's lives and struggles. The realities of cultures and religions and people's history and struggles will **resource** theology and theological language. This is possible because the encounter with cultures and religions is more than encounter because of our

[2] T. S. Eliot "Little Gidding", quoted in *Embraced by Compassion* by Barbara Fiand (New York: Cross Road, 1993), 69.

participation, insertion and immersion into the lived realities of the cultures and religions of people. Herein we speak of deeper inculturation going beyond conceptually blue-printed inculturation of academics without participation, immersion and insertion into people's lives. Deeper inculturation can be expressed symbolically as the double baptism into Asian religiousness and poverty of Asian millions as A. Pieris would put it: "humble enough to be baptised in the Jordan of Asian *Religiosity* and bold enough to be baptised on the Cross of Asian *Poverty*."[3]

Asian Christian theologians are aware that we are inheritors of two traditions, namely the Asian and Indic tradition of culture and religions into which we were born, and the Judeo-Christian tradition of Christian faith which we have received as a gift. Hence, Asian Christian theology will reflect our native rootedness in Asian and Indic traditions and theological language will also be resourced and shaped by the double tradition of Judeo-Christian roots of Christian faith and the Indic and or Asian religious and cultural traditions of our continent of which we are heirs. In this affirmation, we do not flatten one tradition with another. We keep to the unique Judeo-Christian tradition always in dialogical openness.

Asian theology starting from the experiences of people living their contextual realities will naturally develop and evolve a linguistic idiom growing from the soil of their experiences. Let us remember that "our theology is our way of sensing and doing things as revealed in our people's struggles for *spiritual* and *social* emancipation and expressed in the idioms and languages of the cultures such struggles have created."[4]

Theology and theological language evolving from encounter with cultures and religions call for an affective openness and a dialogical approach to them as lived by people. Deeper affective knowledge of cultures and religions is necessary and it is more than academic. Such knowledge will leave its stamp on the quality of theology we do and the language that is part of this theology. Theologians must never lose touch with the ways people live their language and use it. Without a continual and sustained contact with people, we are likely to slip into a purely conceptual and academic language though the latter has a place. The point is that such language should not dominate the language of theology.

In the perspective of encounter with cultures and religions, we need to attend to the complex diversity that marks our cultures and religions. Theology resourced by this complex reality will involve embodying this diversity. The linguistic idiom of theology will also reflect the complex diversity of socio-cultural and religious realities of people in our context. This rich diversity of the linguistic idiom of theological language is manifested and embodied in symbols, arts, aesthetic experience, myths, narratives, proverbs, celebrations, historic events, stories linked to daily struggles for livelihood, meaning and fulfillment. The list cannot be exhaustive. Thus one can see that theological language will take many avatars. This would be the creative task of theology in every religio-cultural situation transparent and open to the contemporary struggles of people in the areas of economics and politics.

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[3] Aloysius Pieris, "The Asian Sense in Theology" in *Living Theology in Asia*, ed. John C. England (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1981), 175.
[4] Pieris in *Living Theology in Asia*,174.

In this approach that has experience as the starting-point inductive method of theological reflection will be the primary way of theologising for the life and mission of the church. This method will be in contrast to (not in contradiction of) deductive approach of reflection. Here we could mention some characteristics of Asian ways of thinking. Asian way of reflection will stress a conjunctive approach of 'both and' unlike the disjunctive approach of 'either or' stressing principle of contradiction. We do not reject the latter but the Indian and Asian approach will emphasise the former. The Asian way of reflection and communication would stress an inclusive, liberative, integrative and holistic approach. Symbolic and sacramental thinking will be the preferred way of reflection and communication. The story, metaphor, narrative style of language will characterize theological language.[5] We can also mention the Dhvani theory of reflection and language (Cf. *Methodology*: *Asian Christian Theology*, FABC Papers no. 96 on Dhvani theory). Fr. Anand Amaladoss, one of the speakers of the seminar, has done special studies on Dhvani theory of hermeneutics. This approach integrates affective dimension of human communication and, hence, that of faith and theology. After all the Bible's basic paradigm of divine communication is the narrative and story approach. We need 'to feel our thoughts and to think our feelings' (T. S. Eliot).

The approach we have mentioned above is distinct from the language of concepts formulated in a deductive method of theologising for which the starting-point is not experience and contextual realities but dogma, doctrine, creed and teaching of the church. In this approach, the Bible and its paradigm of communication and language were considered secondary in importance. The Bible served more as confirmation of dogma and doctrine rather than as primary source of faith and doctrine. After the Second Vatican Council, such an approach has been happily reversed and the Bible has come into its own place of fundamental and normative importance in the life of the Church.

These general observations are not unrelated to what de Nobili attempted to do in his Madurai mission.

## Part II. What did de Nobili contribute to Theological Language?

His approach to theology and theological language was in the context of his encounter with Hinduism as a *missionary*. His was one of the first significant encounters with Hinduism. In this encounter, de Nobili came into contact with the culture of the Tamils and their language; the Telugus and their language, which was mainly the language of the Madurai ruling class; and the Sanskritic tradition of the Hindus which de Nobili mastered to the extent that was possible for him. Sanskrit was for de Nobili an opening into the heart of the religion of the Hindus, namely its scriptures. Reading and learning Hindu scriptures was also part of his encounter with Hinduism and the culture of the Hindus though it was marked by a strongly apologetic slant. It was not a blind negative apologetic. If he found valid and beautiful elements and insights in them, he would appreciate and accept them.

[5] Cf. *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology*, FABC Papers No. 96, ch. V.

De Nobili came from Italy influenced by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. His own Jesuit training, especially the period for learning humanities, touched the heart of young Nobili and awakened in him an interest in the humanism of the classics. Such humanistic training that created an openness to the great Greek and Latin classics coming from the Renaissance, a widening of horizons to other cultures, stimulated by letters of Mateo Ricci and others, became an asset for an encounter with Hinduism and Indian culture as he came to experience them in Madurai. "He was a man of culture and hence he could appreciate another culture."[6] De Nobili's cultural openness would echo the saying of Seneca: "*Nihil humanum alienum mihi puto*".

Another significant element that helped de Nobili's approach to Hinduism is the merit of Thomistic theology that recognised the natural 'revelation' vis-?-vis supernatural revelation as understood in his time. This also contributed to de Nobili's development of theological language. This is linked to Catholic belief that through original sin, human nature is not totally corrupt. Hence human beings are capable of works that are morally good.[7] This was also affirmed by the Council of Trent against the position of the Reformers, especially Martin Luther who believed that original human nature was totally corrupt and hence incapable of any good work in the natural order.

The Thomistic tradition of analogy and language of analogy are closely linked to the approach of de Nobili for development of theological language. Our interest in the Thomistic doctrine of analogy is its use in theology and theological language.[8] Trained in Thomistic theology as all Jesuits were, De Nobili was familiar with the use of analogy, especially analogical use of language for theological concepts. I draw attention to two types of analogy used in theology: *Analogia entis and analogia fidei*.

In *Analogia entis* we use known things in their similarity to refer to things not seen with the same characteristics but with difference. In *Analogia fidei* God's revelation and self-communication as testified to in the Bible and biblical revelation are given in known human words, language and symbols. Theological language is an integration of both types of analogy. One calls for the other and one implies the other. Such use of analogy is part of Thomistic theology. As inheritor of this tradition, de Nobili was able to create and use theological language in his Tamil writings. Often the merit of this tradition is not sufficiently acknowledged. In the development of theological language in the context of cultures and religions, there is always an implicit horizon of analogy. One can see the use of both *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei* in de Nobili's development of theological language. In his approach and writings both analogies meet.

De Nobili's theology is a theology of a missionary of his time. The capacity for analogical approach and imagination on his part is also a mark of dialogical openness however

[6] Pieris' observation of de Nobili shared in a personal conversation.
[7] Cf. *Dharma, Hindu and Christian According to Roberto de Nobili* by Soosai Arokiasamy, Roma, Editrice Gregoriana, 1986, pp316-321; cf ibidem f.n. 165 and also reference to the same in his *Responsio*, in Dahmen's *Robert de Nobili, L'Apotre des Brahmes*, 90-91.
[8] Cf. "Doctrine of St. Thomas on Analogy," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol.1, 374- 381.
[9] On metaphor and analogy cf. the article of Joseph Lobo, "Metaphor and Theologising in Asia," in VJTR 69 (2005): 264-290.

limited from contemporary perspectives. We can also state that in the contemporary attempts at developing theological language, analogical imagination is an enduring horizon of theology, be it narrative theology, story theology, or symbolic theology.[9] Lobo says, "The "Asian heart" that is uniquely sensitive to the evocative and revelatory power of symbols, metaphors and narratives, therefore, has a great advantage over a purely rationalistic mind… We Asians, then, need to use this advantage to the full in our theologising process."[10]

The next principle de Nobili used in his encounter with culture and religion of the country was the criterion of true religion and morality. This includes reason (*lumen naturale*).[11] For him true religion did not mean only revealed religion of Christianity but also all that one could know about God's existence and God's nature through reason which is still capable of knowing good and bad even after the original sin. Following this principle, de Nobili would affirm that one should accept whatever is compatible with true religion and morality (often he puts it negatively: whatever is not against true religion and morality must be accepted). This principle implies recognition of positive elements of true religion and morality in Hinduism. De Nobili refers to them as *margaritae*—pearls.[12] He uses also *dharmavakyas* and *maturavacanakal* for such good elements.[13] The principle of true religion and morality was also an important element of genuine humanism helpful in the encounter of cultures and religions, therefore the gospel for de Nobili in his time.

We have to note that in adoption of terms, analogical use and creating new terms to signify Christian truths and ideas derived from Hindu tradition and Indian culture, the theological suppositions of de Nobili discussed earlier are implicit and operative. The approach of de Nobili contrasts with that of Goncalo Fernandes who thought using Indian terms (terms derived from Hindu usage) would dilute Christian faith, if not Hinduise it. (This problem de Nobili handles in his first defence of his method.[14] The approach of de Nobili goes beyond mere (literal) translation of terms. It was indeed a challenging theological task which aroused severe opposition. The better defence is made in his *Narratio*.[15]

A linguistic principle De Nobili uses in the adoption of terms for the communication of Christian truths and ideas is the principle of *yogartam* and *rudhiartam*. *Yogartam* means usage of terms according to etymology and root meaning of words and rudhiartam means usage of terms according to the usage of people going with custom, history and tradition. The principle of *yogartam* and *rudhiartam* belongs to the tradition of technical language of grammarians and theoreticians, later borrowed by the *naiyayikas* (logicians).[16] One may

[10] *Ibid*., 290.
[11] Cf. Dharma, *Hindu and Christian*, part III, chapter 7.
[12] Margarittae = pearls, cf. *Indian Customs*, ed. Rajamanickam, Palayamkottai, De Nobili Research Institute, 1972, p.37 according to the Latin text.
[13] Cf. *Dharma, Hindu and Christian According to Roberto de Nobili* by Soosai Arokiasamy (Roma: Editrice Gregoriana, 1986), 185.
[14] Dahmen, Robert de Nobili L'Apotre des Brahmes.
[15] *Narratio* (Latin)—*Adaptation*, English version by Rajamanickam, Palayamkottai, De Nobili Research Institute, 1971.
[16] Cf. for the full technical source f.n.105 on p.149 in *Dharma, Hindu and Christian*.

understand the use of this principle by de Nobili narrowly only in terms of translation of Christian concepts into religious Tamil. In de Nobili's approach, the use of this principle and experimentation with creating theologically adequate terms imply something more, namely openness, modification and correction. The use of this principle is well illustrated in his attempts for adoption of terms for God.[17] In this approach too, the principle of true religion and morality and analogy of theological language are operative.

In my study of de Nobili, *Dharma, Hindu and Christian*, I discuss and illustrate a number of terms adopted or created by de Nobili. I illustrate briefly the usage of a few terms here: *tarmam, vetam, guru, satguru, sanniyasi, sanniyasam, avatar, moccam (moksha), jnanam, jnana vetam, bhakti (patti-Tamil), jnanopatecam*, etc.[18]

Let us take the term *tarmam* in Tamil (*dharma* in Skt.). In the Sanskritic Hindu or Indic tradition, dharma is polyvalent. De Nobili shows sufficient understanding of dharma in Hinduism. Having understood the basic dharmic vision in the Indic tradition and familiar with the Tamil tradition of the polyvalent usage of *tarmam*, de Nobili uses with great deftness the term tarmam in its polyvalent sense in his Christian Tamil writings. We just mention some of the uses: *tarmavakkiyankal* (dharmavakkiyas—holy and righteous utterances), tarmakunankal (dharmagunas—virtues of righteousness), *tarmaceyem* (dharma jaya - victory of righteousness), *tarmacupavam* (righteous nature), and *tarma kopuram* (tower of righteousness —a term descriptive of the holiness of Virgin Mary or of saints), *tarmaneri* ( the way of righteousness), *tarmapakkiyam* ( the holy or righteous beatitude ), etc. (Here I mention some other usages (cf. Ibidem, 374): *tarma arokiyam, tarmacarittiram, tarmacurupam, tarmakaranankal, tarma upatecam , tarmavacanam, tarmaviti, tarma vivakam, tarmatirtam, tarmaparakar, tarma vali, tarmanimittam, tarmakuna campannar, tarmatairiyam* and countless other usages of tarmam. All these usages by de Nobili reflect his deep understanding of the religious usage of tarmam in its multiple meaning in Tamil. My own assessment of de Nobili in this regard is that he has deeply appreciated the rich polyvalent and polysemic tarmam and that it has become one of the significant testimonies of his dialogue with culture and a positive fruit of such a dialogue. By this understanding of tarmam de Nobili testifies to its catholicity, that is, it belongs to all humanity.

To sample de Nobili's use of words resourced by culture and religion, I would like to refer to de Nobili's expression of "receiving *jnanopatecam*". He says in Jnanopatecam, kantam 1( in Tamil) at the end of the first paragraph of the first lesson (p. 5): "If you (the student or the disciple) have understood these three special things (to know God, to know the means of rejecting sin and to walk in the way of dharma until death, avoiding temptations with the grace of God), then you could be considered to have received jnanopatecam"(*jnanopatecam pettrayenru*), an expression of a disciple receiving shiksha from his guru in the Saivaite tradition. Careful reading of de Nobili's Tamil writings will give us many more instances of this kind of language shaped by the religious or cultural traditions of the Tamils.

We could say that de Nobili had become as it were an insider of the genuine religious ethos and the language of the Tamils. This was possible for de Nobili because of his

[17] *Dharma, Hindu and Christian*, 149 and also *Ibid*. f.n. 105.
[18] *Dharma, Hindu and Christian*, 178-188, 191-224, 242, 267, 269-288, 322-336.

immersion into the religious culture and language of the Tamils of his time in Madurai as part of his religious commitment. Here I would like to make an observation relevant to our discussion of theological language resourced by cultures and religions: Words in a language resourced by culture, life, struggles and religious experiences embody and tell stories of people. Words become code-words of these stories. We need to decode and recognize the beginnings, middles and ends of life stories indicated by words.

Here one can discuss the accusations of Goncalo Fernandes against de Nobili and de Nobili's response as given in *Responsio* concerning use of terms and symbols.[19] The accusations of G. Fernandes point to the problems and difficulties encountered by the pioneer of Madurai mission, especially de Nobili's use of Hindu religious terms in Christian writings.

The Tamil used by de Nobili is religious language. It belongs to the religious tradition of the Tamils. It is this Tamil that marks the style of the voluminous writings of de Nobili on theological questions (cf. the paper of V. M. Dasan on the contribution of de Nobili to Tamil writings presented in the same volume). When people of his time read his writings they resonated with them because of the religiously affective style of his works.

## Part III. Points for further Reflection

In the adoption of religious and theological terms in Tamil, one could recognise a dialogical openness to theological meanings present in the original religious home of these terms acceptable to Christian theology. In this approach of de Nobili, there is a meeting of *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei*. The adoption of these terms means that there is a 'dialogical' encounter between Christian theology and that of Hinduism. At a time when many tend to devalue Thomism, I for one consider the implications of analogy for dialogue. I appreciate the dialogical potential of analogy of the Thomistic tradition for encounter with religions and cultures. In all our present approach of dialogue, analogical perspectives are implicit.

In the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament, analogy is operative. Here is an illustration of the translation of the biblical term *Torah*. In Hebrew it means 'instructions or teachings of Yahweh'. It is translated into Greek Old Testament as *Nomos*. The original meaning that Torah is Yahweh's instructions is not removed. It is implicit in the new term *nomos*, meaning law. The latter brings a new meaning to the Hebrew term torah, namely the instructions of Yahweh to His people brings the new nuance in the meaning of *nomos* that Torah, as God's teaching, is binding or normative. The law (*nomos*) in this additional meaning points to Yahweh as one who is teaching people for life and salvation.

Here we can consider that translated Bible in different languages in the tradition of the churches is indeed the word of God. The translations of the Bible as the word of God bring

[19] The full title is: *Responsio ad ea quae contra modum quo nova Missio Madurensis utitur ad ethnicos Christo convertendos obiecta sunt*.
[20] David Burrell, *Furrow*, Jan. 2002, p. 8.

to people the core meaning of inherited faith. Unlike the Christian tradition, in Islam, Quran is the word of Allah only in Arabic. Translations are not Quran. As one author remarks somewhat humorously: "Christians believe that Jesus is the Word of God made human, while Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the Word of God made Arabic".[20]

The religious and theological language and terms adopted by a particular community of faith in its socio-cultural and religious situation point not only to a dynamic understanding of faith but also to an evolving 'revelation' (Gispert). In translations of the Bible officially approved by the church, new nuances and meanings gained belong to the growing understanding of faith and therefore of theology. Every translation of faith tradition into a particular language of a people in their socio-cultural framework takes our understanding of faith a step further because it involves new nuances in meaning of faith traditions resourced by cultures and religions in their positive and valuable aspects which are a testimony to the Spirit at work in cultures and religions. These gains in meaning of faith tradition can be understood as 'evolving revelation' linked to the foundational revelation and tradition of the faith of the church. These dimensions are present in the Tamil theological writings of de Nobili.

In some later post-reformation Protestant theologies, in the framework of dialectical theology, meeting of *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei* is rejected (e.g. Karl Barth). In this approach 'deeper inculturation' is not possible. In this theology, there is no acceptance and appreciation of the natural order of human beings because of the belief in total corruption of the human nature after the original fall of humankind symbolized by disobedience of the first parents (Gen. 3). In contrast, in the catholic tradition, because of the acceptance of the goodness of the natural order, openness to inculturation is present. As mentioned earlier, acceptance of analogy in theology and faith is the expression of this and this helps towards inculturation including inculturation of theological language.

What de Nobili attempted successfully and the breakthroughs he made in his time must be evaluated in the context of his own time including the limitations and mistakes. What he did was in continuity with ancient tradition of the church when it encountered different peoples and cultures, yet specifically new. For us the these 'initial' steps pointed to a direction in which the community of faith is called to make its own breakthroughs and not just repeat what de Nobili began and what our predecessors, including Jesuit pioneers, did. The social cultural and religious ferment of our country, Asia and the world, together with the awakening of those at the margins of society, calls us to become partners in solidarity and bearers of hope for a new world. Dialogue and encounter should mark our world coming together, not a clash of civilisations. Pioneers of dialogue and inculturation invite us to a future of interdependent solidarity and thus to build a civilisation of love.