**FRAMING**

**Translingualism**: Based in the work of scholars like Suresh Canagarajah, Min-Zhan Lu, Bruce Horner, and more recently, Jay Jordan, I attempt to look at the ways in which language has evolved through acts of negotiation. Furthermore, I pay particular attention to *how* this happens through non-linguistic resources and material ecologies within the work of the Jesuits. I argue that the Jesuits took a translingual approach to rhetorical education. Rather than confining meaning to grammar or separating languages and rhetorical traditions, the Jesuits’ rhetorical works demonstrate an integrated view of languages, where the cultures of Europe and India work together and create new ways of *doing* rhetoric.

**Comparative/Cultural Rhetoric**: Building on the work of scholars like Bo Wang and Lu-Ming Mao, I attempt to look at the cultural particularities of rhetoric in a way that is aware of my standpoint as a scholar and reflexively avoids the objectivity of the outsider’s perspective. Right now, this is mostly accounted for within the way in which I suggest the rhetors themselves use rhetoric reflexively.

**Post-Secularism**: My study attempt to understand religion’s relationship with rhetoric, particularly rhetorical education. Like Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Charles Taylor, I understand religion as a constitutive practice imbricated in social practice and knowledge. To better understand religious rhetoric, then, I look for the particular ways in which it constructs knowledge—education, for instance, or rhetoric—and provides specific meaning and or interpretations for believers. I integrate theological texts for context and look at the ways in which religion not only influenced the form of rhetorical texts but their purpose and reception. Religion, in this sense, helps construct the *how* as well as the *what* and *why* of rhetoric.

**Historiography**: This study of rhetorical education is based in an eclectic variety of texts and practices. Because much of the actual record of Jesuit colleges in India has been lost but also because their de facto rhetorical curriculum (*ratio studiorum*) only provides one perspective on how the Jesuits used and taught rhetoric, I look at their schools alongside textbooks and treatises as well as the embodied and material practices of the Jesuits and their students. I also situate these materials within their reception, investigating Jesuit correspondence and annual reports to situate Jesuit rhetoric within the larger Jesuit mission and the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church. While this has produced a less than traditional picture of Jesuit rhetorical education, including many gaps, it is reflective of the diversity—as well as fragmentation—found within Jesuit rhetorical education in India.

**GLOSSARY**

*collapam*: A dialogue, or reflection, on a certain topic, similar to an inquiry but based in the development of knowledge through discussion and conversation.

*guru*: A teacher, responsible for intellectual as well as spiritual development. A *guru* usually attracts students through his reputation as a wise person within the community, and students exclusively remain under their tutelage once they begin to study. Gurus teach their students orally, by leading the memorization of sacred texts based on their knowledge (or knowledge they attained in their own apprenticeship with their guru) and by engaging in intellectual dialogues or debates. Gurus typically ascribe to a particular religious sect. Well-respected *gurus* with an established following may be called *pandarams*, which is roughly equivalent to “sage.” Although, *pandaram* can also refer to a particular caste.

*ṣiṣya*: Translated as student or follower. Sisyas remain under the tutelage of one guru, who guides their intellectual and spiritual development. Sisyas are encouraged to voice their doubts and questions in order to learn and grow.

**Roberto de Nobili at the Limits of Rhetoric**

Writing in *The Dialogue on Eternal Life*, the Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili commits what would seem to be a major cultural faux-pas. He attempts to prove that both Rama and Chokkanatha (Shiva) are not gods, that the *Ramayana* is wrong. He writes, “these foolish people thought, in a confused way, that God is like themselves: that the gods, like themselves, have their own wives, that they gave great attachment towards these wives and are unable to be separate from them and therefore hold these wives on their laps, keep them on their hips, carry them on their heads, hold them on their chests. … They make God, who is above all things, the lowest among lascivious people” (*The Dialogue on Eternal Life*, 288). De Nobili’s characterization of Hindu conceptions of divinity was mistaken. Nevertheless, de Nobili was not misinformed when making this judgment. His critique was based in the concentrated study of both Sanskrit and Tamil sacred scriptures and led by his own *gurus* or teachers. He not only sought out these texts but also sought out scholars who could explain these texts to him. Yet, his descriptions of Rama, Ravana, and Shiva fail to accurately represent their divinity. He explains one part of the *Ramayana* in this way: “When Rama killed Ravana, by doing so, they say, he became guilty of a great murder. In order to expiate the guilt of this murder, Rama worshipped an image [Shiva], as a traditional account about this place tells us. But if one carefully analyses this, it becomes clear that this story cannot be accepted by reasonable people” (288). De Nobili reasons that God could never be guilty after murdering a sinner because this would make God guilty of innumerable crimes. And, if Rama worships another god, he “cannot be the transcendent-and-immanent Being who is the creator of all” (288-289).

Based in syllogistic reasoning, de Nobili’s proof is logical. But, de Nobili’s assessment reveals that he fails to understand the text’s portraits of divinity. Within the Indian epic, Ravana is characterized as the king of Sri Lanka, but he is also a demon and a Brahmin. Rama’s atonement in the story is an atonement for killing a Brahmin. Rama is a prince, but he is not exactly a god. He is understood to be the seventh avatar of Vishnu, an incarnation or descendent of the gods. Chokkanatha is the familiar name in Madurai of Shiva, the third god in the Hindu *trimurti*, or triumvirate, and the god of destruction. The relations between these three gods are complex and unequal; they conflict as they overlap. The shifting nature of their relationships stand in stark contrast to the three-in-one unity of the Christian God even as they mirror the mystery behind Christianity’s own Holy Trinity.[[1]](#endnote-1) De Nobili’s characterization of Hindu conceptions of divinity was not only mistaken but also made other, creating difference within its very articulation. His failure to understand local belief, in this sense, demonstrates the inaccessibility of religious difference. His refusal to engage with local stories distinguishes this as a failure with rhetorical significance.

From this perspective, Christianity becomes an all-encompassing hermeneutic and as such, an impasse. De Nobili’s Christian faith is what renders him unable to first recognize difference, and then, to understand that difference. Here, Steven Mailloux’s conception of Jesuit rhetoric as the practice of “rhetorical hermeneutics,” a rhetoric that involves both production and reception, that is, reading as well as speaking and/or writing, is, in fact, the danger of such a rhetoric that is religiously motivated. In his article, “Comparative Jesuit Theorhetoric,” Mailloux follows out the results of such a danger. In spite of modeling Jesuit theorhetoric as a successful, transformative cross-cultural practice, it is the unresolved specter of ethnocentrism that lingers at the end of his argument (265). Thomas Amorose astutely identifies another way to conceive of the danger of Christian rhetoric in his concluding chapter to the collection, *Renovating Christian Rhetoric*. He explains that the term “rhetoric” implies negotiation, open consideration of all rhetorical options, and engagement in the *public* sphere (137). However, he writes, Christian attitudes towards rhetoric are “more concerned with the way that faith gives meaning to human beings than it is with the way human beings give meaning to faith” (137). In this sense, Christian rhetoric is dangerous not only for the demands it places upon a reading of the world but also for the particular way in which Christianity reconstitutes the notion of what it means to be human, in this case, to be a rhetor.

Yet, if we view these kinds of cross-cultural incongruities instead as opportunities, as has been suggested by Lu-Ming Mao, de Nobili’s failure provides a way into re-imagining the limits of rhetoric through Christianity and, in particular, rhetorical possibilities for inter-religious dialogue. Citing Walter Mignolo, Mao argues that instances of incongruity provide a “loci of enunciation” that can provide new logics that are neither a revision nor the truth. He develops a processual model of representation, “with which we learn to experience facts of usage and facts of ‘non’-usage just as readily as we do facts of essence and recognize relations of interdependence and incongruity just as comfortably as we do structures of sameness or difference” (220). Mao provides a method for doing comparative work that rejects authenticity and the boundaries between the local and global as well as the past and present. This chapter extends this idea of incongruity and uses it to locate the place of rhetorical failure within cross-cultural rhetoric. By lingering within the “non”-usage that haunts usage, I foreground incongruity as not just a rhetorical methodology but a starting point for the study of rhetorics that cross cultures.

As Paul Lynch and Matthew Miller’s recent review of literature on religion and writing suggests, religion has resurfaced as an important area of inquiry within both rhetoric and composition. Religion has been received apprehensively by some. [[2]](#endnote-2) But, the field has expanded understandings of the complexity of religious belief and experience, using religion as a site to interrogate modern assumptions and attitudes.[[3]](#endnote-3) While a majority of this work has focused on the Christian tradition in the United States, as interest in religious sites of rhetoric and writing has increased, scholars have begun to focus on a greater diversity of religious traditions, especially Judaism (Bernard-Donals, Holdstein). Similarly, as rhetorical studies has expanded its purview to non-Western rhetorical traditions, scholars have begun to investigate different rhetorical traditions with roots in a wide array of religious practices. In Roberta Binkley and Carol Lipson’s 2009 collection, *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetorics*, almost every chapter arguably intersects with religion. Similarly, half of the articles found in *RSQ’s* 2013 special issue on Comparative Rhetoric touch on religion. Yet these comparative studies rarely interrogate the relationship between rhetoric and religion even as scholars in these works have directly challenged the ethics of studying other cultures.[[4]](#endnote-4) As the field moves to expand its notion of rhetoric beyond the West, it must also expand its understanding of the different ways in which religion defines, relates, and motivates rhetoric. Both scholars who study religious rhetoric and scholars who study comparative rhetoric have focused on research methodology,[[5]](#endnote-5) but this work has yet to be put in conversation. Following the work of cultural and comparative rhetoricians, work investigating rhetorical texts that are also religious must begin to situate these acts within a broader network of meaning based in the particularities of its production and reception. Furthermore, this work must question the act of reading/knowing religious rhetoric itself. That is, rather than attempting to provide an objective account of religious rhetoric, it must be responsive and reflective.

Therefore, this essay begins not by asking how we can understand difference, but instead, with the proposition that sometimes we can’t. Acknowledging this, the essay attempts to understand how Jesuits were able to operate within these limits, rhetorically. Beginning with de Nobili’s failure, this essay shows how De Nobili overcame his inability to understand difference through dialogue. In keeping with a tradition that was just as much Indian as it was European, his mistakes were not meant to persist. Instead, they provided an opening for dialectic correction. As such, his mistakes allowed him to read his rhetorical action back upon himself. Within this move from dialectic correction to self-correction, de Nobili opened himself up to be converted by those he encountered. More than just a rhetorical gesture, this disposition of vulnerability was made available to de Nobili by the very thing that also seemingly interrupted his ability to recognize that which was different—his Christian faith. The difference that he was met with fueled a transformation that went beyond cultural incongruity, difference providing the opportunity for not only dialogue but also the eventual conversion of the self. Instead of seeing the role of missionary as solely a call to convert others, de Nobili practiced Ignatian spirituality in a way that required the constant conversion of the self through a dialogue with the surrounding world. It was in his mistakes, a perceived conflict between two alternatives, or the preference for one over the other, that de Nobili opened up a space for dialogue, negotiation, and revision, in a word, transformation.

This essay, then, explores de Nobili’s *Dialogue on Eternal Life* for the ways in which its formal conventions call into question discourse itself and betray an alignment with the Indian rhetorical tradition. I then look at de Nobili’s *Report on Certain Customs of the Indian Nation* as a counterpoint. Unlike his dialogues, this text was written for a European audience and invokes Western logic to make available his particular time and place. I analyze how this logical and seemingly anthropological account functions alongside de Nobili’s embodied rhetorical practices and calls attention to the limits of transnational *writing*. In my final section, I treat these embodied practices on their own to demonstrate how de Nobili challenged the stasis of two opposing rhetorical traditions by foregrounding the fleeting moment of enunciation. In doing so, this essay demonstrates a way into understanding rhetorical mistakes as productive spaces for cross-cultural learning and the reanimation of traditional rhetorical forms.

***The Dialogue on Eternal Life***

Roberto de Nobili was one of the first Jesuits to not only learn both the Tamil and Sanskrit languages but to also write in these languages. Born in Rome, Italy, in 1577, de Nobili joined the Jesuits in 1596 against the wishes of his aristocratic family (Sauliere 8).[[6]](#endnote-6) After studying theology at the Roman College, he arrived to India in 1605, and in 1607, took up residence in Madurai within the Jesuit Malabar Province, joining the mission of the Portuguese Jesuit Gonçalo Fernandes. The mission was floundering, only managing to convert a small number of pariahs in the historic city center of Tamil culture. In the shadows of Madurai’s grand temple of Minakshi, de Nobili began to study the local language and religion. Eager to find ways to expand the mission, de Nobili was persuaded by his Sanskrit teacher and Pundit Pandâra Sannidhi, baptized Sivadharma, to adapt Christianity to local cultural practices. This *pandaram* told him, “If your object is only to save your soul, you can go about dressed as you please, but if you want to be a master among these people, teach them the spiritual law, and gather a large number of disciples you must, as far as you can, adapt yourself to the manners, customs and ideas of this country” (qtd. in Laerzio to Aquaviva, November 20, 1609). Following this advice, de Nobili fashioned himself as a *sanyasi*, a renunciate or ascetic, from the *Kashitrya* or warrior caste. He quickly began to attract followers and started to engage in interreligious debates with the Brahmin intellectual and religious elites of Madurai. In one of his earliest letters, he described his daily life and revealed the central role discourse placed in his day, writing, “After rising and saying Mass and commending myself to the Lord, I admit any one who wishes to come to talk or discuss with me” (de Nobili to Bellermino, December 1, 1607). These daily discussions became his mission. When he was not discussing, he was writing. He explained further, “The rest of the time, which is very short, I devote to writing refutations of some of the chief doctrines of these people, in their own language, which is very beautiful, very copious and most elegant (*bellissima copiosissima e molto elegante*)” (de Nobili to Bellermino, December 1, 1607). While much of this early work has been lost, the rhetorical flair of de Nobili’s extant writing betray their embedding in both the rhetorical cultures of early modern Europe *and* India. The sixteenth century was a lively period for Tamil (Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam). Furthermore, this period saw what Parimel G. Patil has termed *navya-nyāya*, or “New Logic.” Both the *Nyāya-vaiśeṣika* and *Vedānta* textual traditions experienced lively innovations during this period (“The End,” 293). Meant not only to teach Christian doctrine but also to produce good Christians, De Nobili’s surviving *Nitya Jivani Collapam*,or *The Dialogue on Eternal Life*, demonstrates the way in which de Nobili engaged with the rhetorical culture of Brahmin intellectuals. This surviving dialogue attempts to provide a description of Christianity as the one true Veda. The text was written in Tamil prose in the style of a dialogue between a *guru*, or teacher, and his *ṣiṣya*, or student. The *guru/ṣiṣya* dialectic was a mode of religious and cultural education in India and is preserved throughout its written tradition. De Nobili’s dialogue mimics both as a way to lead others into the truth and experience of Christianity.

Dialogue played a prominent role in the conversion narratives that de Nobili told. In the account of his first conversion, that of his Tamil teacher baptized under the name “Albert,” he wrote, first, that “he [Albert] argues with me about God, Transmigration, Creation etc., and seeing that reason was not on his side, he began to show himself more humble and respectful” (de Nobili to Fr. General, December 1 1607). De Nobili, then, began by conversing and reasoning about God. These conversations eventually led to a more serious study of religion, and this is when the conversion came:

“We agreed on studying our respective religions, and so we did during twenty days at the rate of four or five hours a day; and your Reverence must know that these people are not so ignorant as some men imagine. After I had instructed him thoroughly for twenty days, he declared himself satisfied on all points and asked me to baptize him, which I did with great joy, for he was the first in this city to hear the Truth and embrace it.” (de Nobili to Aquaviva, December 1 1607)

De Nobili evangelized through an intensive interpersonal inquiry into religion. The initial dialogue and following intensive study culminated in baptism. The student was to then “embrace” Christianity. *The Dialogue on Eternal Life* demonstrated the way in which this kind of transformation was achieved.

*The Dialogue on Eternal Life* was an exposition of the Christian faith as both reasonable and right. As his translators have pointed out, this placed the text clearly within a lineage of Christian apologetics that was rooted in the logic of Thomas Aquinas (Amaladass and Clooney). Yet, while much of the text was aimed at providing a reasoned definition of truth in line with Christian theology, de Nobili’s definition also attempted to align Christianity with a Vedic tradition. Furthermore, his inquiry into truth drew attention to—and further motivated—the dialogic nature of the text itself. In the text, de Nobili defined the role of truth within faith by differentiating between knowledge, inference, and faith. De Nobili wrote that knowledge is necessary but not always accessible to everyone. Thus, the Lord uses inference and faith to supplement what some cannot know via reason alone. De Nobili, then, defined knowledge, not as “knowing various things,” but rather, he explained, “knowledge (*jñanam*) investigates that Reality which is both immanent and transcendent (*paraparavastu*) and has the form of knowledge; it is a knowledge which points out the meritorious means of reaching liberation (*mokṣa*)” (234). De Nobili’s definition depended upon the distinction between this Reality and reality. De Nobili wrote, “Nothing created is essentially true;” therefore, knowledge is only that which existed in the world as the “Veda,” the Word spoken by God, “that speech which makes known righteousness (*dharma*) and unrighteousness (*adharma*)” (236). Anything else was partial, incomplete, different than a Reality that made itself known by being both immanent and transcendent, *paraparavastu*. De Nobili builds a definition of Christian truth as the Veda, building upon local concepts of *dharma* and *mokṣa*. In constellating these terms, de Nobili engaged with the Indian tradition. He built a foundation for his re-definition of the Veda or truth by aligning it with fundamental Indian concepts. Knowledge, rather than being an established set of facts, was participation in a greater Reality. This conception of reality as Reality motivated the dialogic of the text. And, it was this dialectic that upheld the truth of the text while also making it accessible to this new audience. De Nobili’s definition, in this sense, depended upon the text being a dialogue and drew attention to the essential nature of this form for understanding Christian truth. He was not just mobilizing local terms, he was also mobilizing a local form—dialogue.

Dialogue is an important rhetorical form used in the Indian tradition, found as far back as the *Rg Veda* and the *Upaniṣads*. Because these classic texts were transmitted orally over generations from teacher to student, Indian dialogues mirrored their own transmission. Dialogue, then, was used to demonstrate how certain teachings emerged from larger conversations while also allowing these texts to negotiate authority, introduce new ideas, and mediate difference (Black and Patton 1-2). Dialogues did not just structure Indian texts, though, they also demonstrated the metonymic function that words could play within Vedic rituals. Within texts like the *Rg Veda*, dialogue was enacted and concrete, a form for contemplating the power of speech itself. Based on an Upanishadic model of inquiry, where knowledge was created through discussion, dialogues could just as well emphasize intersubjectivity (Rohlman 140). In this sense, dialogue also represented evolution beyond ritual towards intellectual inquiry, with the *guru/ ṣiṣya* dialectic becoming a vehicle of knowledge. Because the guru represented the embodiment of knowledge that was arrived at through discursive exchange, knowledge developed its own lineage *param-parā*,from one to another (Doniger 140). Dialogue could act as both the means of knowledge and the source of its own authority. In using this form, de Nobili played with this tradition and utilized dialogue’s potential as both a vehicle and agent of knowledge to foreground Christian ways of knowing/being.

De Nobili’s dialogue, in fact, opened with a definition of the form itself. This move foregrounded his calculated choice of the form and connected this choice to his purpose. He wrote, “Since we shall throw light on eternal life by answering the questions you raise, this book is called *The Dialogue on Eternal Life*. For ‘dialogue’ (*collapam*) means ‘raising questions and answering them.’ This is a dialogue ‘on eternal life’ (*nitya jivani*)*,* since we are inquiring together into liberation (*mokṣa*), which is eternal” (233). In defining his dialogue upfront, he also demonstrated his awareness of the dialogic Indian tradition and the importance of colloquy for inquiry. This emphasis on “inquiring together” is carried throughout the text. The progression of the text is fueled by the student’s questions, and these questions provided de Nobili with the opportunity to engage with the Indian intellectual tradition throughout the text. Questions like, “You say that ‘Veda’ means ‘the truth revealed by the Lord.’ But some say that ‘Veda’ means ‘words spoken by trustworthy people.’ Could these two be the same?”, integrate the perspective of *nyāya* logic into text (235). *Naiyyayika* scholars contended that authority was embodied in the speaker and therein ensured the veracity of a text. In many letters, dialogues became the way that de Nobili refuted criticism and engaged new followers. De Nobili was able to persuade his first convert’s former *guru*, a renowned *pandaram*,to support his conversion and even spread de Nobili’s Christian doctrine after they had a discussion (Laerzio to Aquaviva, November 20, 1609). De Nobili was engaging with methods of religious teaching and discussion that were already in place, and dialogue became a place for de Nobili to enter into the religious conversation in India. This question, then, provided de Nobili with the opportunity to anticipate criticism against his claim (that the Veda is only revealed by the Lord) and set up a different definition of rhetorical authority and agency. Other questions provided an opportunity for further clarification, “what would be wrong were one to maintain that there is no Veda, no word spoken by the Lord, anywhere in the world?” (236). A question like this challenged de Nobili in a more indirect manner and demonstrated the student’s role in fueling their inquiry. However, the role of the student in the text was not only as an intellectual foil or representative of competing schools of thought.

The student also provided a model for discipleship. The student’s first contribution to the text was an open statement of his desire for this kind of “dialogue on wisdom” that can lead to liberation. Then, after listening to the teacher, he openly stated his doubts. He asked, “what you have explained in this way has become very clear to me. But still there is one more doubt, and this too must be cleared up by your gracious explanation, as the sun’s rays dispel the darkness” (238). This provided the teacher with an opportunity to further explain himself and to clarify the role of doubt within dialogic inquiry. The teacher responded by encouraging the student to “tell me all your doubts without hesitation … when a disciple hides his doubts from his teacher, ignorance will increasingly cover the faculty of understanding in his soul. For ignorance is the cause of all that you call ‘doubts’” (238). The teacher’s statement clarified the student’s role in the dialogue as well as how a student should be seeking the truth as a disciple. In response, the student then moved on to ask why the Veda was necessary when humans already possessed the freedom to do good and evil, which led into a discussion of the hierarchy of truths. This kind of modeling was weaved into the teacher’s explanations, demonstrating the ways in which the arguments of the text should be contemplated and then followed.

Through the text’s dialogue, the methods for arriving at truth could be found alongside an outline of that truth. The dialogue included within its structure directions for how to seek out the truth, for how to inquire. For instance, when the student asked how one might be able to differentiate between all the various philosophies, which ones were truth and which were not, the teacher responded by outlining exactly how one used reason to judge the situation. He explained:

There is a popular saying, ‘whatever exists is true, whatever does not exist is false’ I.e., if a word corresponds to an existing object, then it is said to be a true word, but if a word does not correspond to an existing object, it is said to be untrue. Therefore, if something is claimed to be existing and also not existing, both these claims cannot be true. If one examines the two statements – ‘the Lord exists,’ and ‘the Lord does not exist,’ both cannot be true. One must be false and the other true. As with these examples, you must think similarly on other topics. (#)

De Nobili took this opportunity to come up with a general approach that his disciple could adopt in almost any situation. The dialogue became a way to teach reasoning and even, how to dialogue. This kind of modeling also demonstrated real methods of devotion by outlining the shape of discipleship. Importantly, de Nobili’s section on truth ends with a call for meditation. The teacher concluded by instructing his student to pray:

It is already evening, the time for your prayer. Your blessed ambrosial words have become the only food I need. I will meditate on what you have explained until now, and these undying words will be food for my mind, which will become enlightened by digesting them, so I will be strengthened in knowledge. But tomorrow we must continue this Dialogue, and you must teach me whatever remains to be taught. (241)

The structure of the dialogue was not only important for what it said but also for what it did. De Nobili used the form of dialogue as a way to arrive at truth and teach others how they might also find truth, both practically in the way that they asked questions and sought answers and in what they did with the dialogue—in the ways that they responded and enacted what the dialogue taught.

With this dialogue, De Nobili called his disciple out of themselves. He began this process through the form of the dialogue and completed it with the dialogue’s final focus on Christian action. As an immanent presence within the world, God had been revealed and could be known via verbal testimony, according to de Nobili, but God required that faith move believers beyond a mere knowledge of God’s transcendent Truth. Christians were asked to share in and reproduce the immanence of this transcendence. His dialogue emphasized, “The human being must reach his finality, namely liberation, by accepting these truths in faith and living according to them” (239). This move within the dialogue engaged with the dialogue’s form as a propaedeutic of Christian formation. More importantly, it pushed readers towards further understanding how the text could lead towards spiritual liberation. He directly instructed them to meditate on his words, acknowledging that comprehension could not come at once—that it depended on more. In this instance, he directly drew attention to the fact that it was action, not just words, that moved one towards enlightenment. The content of the dialogue was important to the extent that it brought one to an understanding of the Truth of God, a truth that was not reducible to any one element in the text but rather found articulation within the lives of believers. Each person could become a light of truth, De Nobili wrote, reproducing the truth of God in their very lives: “when one accepts the truth that the Lord exists, this becomes a great shining light to all people” (270). This ability to reproduce the truth of God exceeded the human ability to know God. De Nobili elaborated, “Even if a person is not interested in seeing this truth, one can say that this truth enlightens his mind, so that even without his knowing it he assents, ‘This is true!’” (270). According to de Nobili’s definition of knowledge, Christian Truth surpassed the human mind; true knowledge came only from God, and this kind of transcendent Truth could not be contained within the human mind.[[7]](#endnote-7) Herein, de Nobili was able to move beyond any one mistake found within the text. The text was not meant to be read as Truth but instead was meant to lead its participants towards participation in the Truth. De Nobili’s dialogue was structured to qualify his own authority and instead invited his readers into participating in the Truth.

The rhetoric of de Nobili’s dialogue undercut its dogmatic discipline, allowing de Nobili to not only engage with the Indian tradition of discourse in form but also in meaning—within its ends.De Nobili leaves his dialogue open at the end, a move we see at work in Platonic dialogues. Plato’s dialogues offer a philosophical journey without conclusive endings. Dialogues like the *Laches*, the *Charmides*, and the *Euthyphro* subtly set the stage for later doctrines found in the *Republic* and *Symposium* but do not offer a thesis of their own, rather they are structured to only destroy the thesis of their opponent’s (Kahn 95-100). Depending on the purpose of the text, dialogues within the Indian tradition provide a clear closure at the end or leave room for open interpretation. Dialogues left open can suggest skepticism, but for de Nobili, this move towards openness was a way to lead readers into action.He argued, it was only in this move beyond knowledge that one came to truly *know* God. De Nobili wrote, “There is a Veda in the world, willed by the Lord, and through the means of this verbal testimony, people endowed with reason should be able to live, knowing that truth which is not present to the mind and which surpasses the power of the mind.” (255). In this final dialogic move, De Nobili demonstrated that the truth of his text could only be known once it was enacted. Knowledge, according to his definition, was called beyond itself to be enacted as Truth. De Nobili’s dialogue was preserved not as a text to be consumed only by the mind but instead as a text to be reproduced also by the body. De Nobili further argued, “if one knows the Lord’s Veda but does not act accordingly, he will not reach liberation” (235). De Nobili invited writers to participate in this Reality with him. The dialogue required a student to ask questions, clarify their doubts in conversation, and finally, to live the shared truths of this inquiry. De Nobili acknowledged the student’s equally important role within the production of knowledge with a caveat: The only way to know is to act. This caveat worked to engage readers and qualify the veracity of his words through their actions. This ending necessarily qualified the text. It defined the dialogue itself as a partially available truth, one that must be understood within its enactment rather than through the simple act of reading. In making his case, de Nobili was able to explain the way in which his own arguments were necessary but not definitive. This total transformation of the person, liberation, was achieved through knowledge, like that which was presented in the dialogue, but inherently transcended knowledge as such.

De Nobili’s dialogues were based in his interactions with the intellectual Brahmin community of Madurai. His careful explanation of intention can also be found in a letter he sent to Laerzio in 1609 reporting on two Brahmins who came to question him and then eventually attacked him in front of an assembly. In his original meeting with them, de Nobili wrote that he explained to them the difference between good works and sin, “sin consisted in turning away from God to embrace a bad and forbidden object,” he said, supporting his definition with Sanskrit texts. But, these Brahmins reported that de Nobili said “the laws of the Brahmins were a tissue of lies” and “giving alms to them brings no merit” and “bathing in the sea at Rameswaram or in the Ganges, is of no avail for salvation.” Sivadharma, de Nobili’s disciple, came to his defense and explained, “there were two manners of life, one which consisted only in ceremonies, baths, anointings, pilgrimages and such like things; and this mode of life he declared to be of no avail for salvation, the other consisted in knowing, loving, and serving God, and this, he said is the only way to attain glory.” Therefore, “The plaintiff’s allegation that people bathing in the Ganges, even without a knowledge of God, can thereby obtain salvation, is most erroneous; it is a law of his own invention.” It is in these kinds of descriptions that de Nobili provides a glimpse into his intellectual milieu. And, the development of his arguments for Christianity become clearer. In another letter, later in his life, de Nobili admitted that it was only in this kind of subtle exchange, non-dogmatic in nature, that he could be successful. He explained, “experience has shown to us that the one we have adopted is the best calculated to bring about a change in their prejudiced minds. It is certainly better than to begin by attacking their gods and errors, for then they become hardened, and if they admit the truth, it is rather to blaspheme than to follow (Bertrand II 264-5). De Nobili went on to show how he was able to convert a devout Vaishnavite through continued lessons where he refrained from criticizing his religious but instead showed and explained to him the truth and encouraged him to draw his own conclusions. And, eventually, he rubbed off the physical signs of his devotion to Vishnu and confessed, “if, when I [de Nobili] began explaining to him the catechism, I had found fault with those signs he certainly would have gone away, and never have come back to listen to my instructions.” These instances, then, show how de Nobili used dialogue to teach his own students and then incorporated his methods into the very text, borrowing content—spending time on the relationship between intention and action. Yet, we also see how de Nobili’s methods evolved away from focusing on the specific faults of local religious belief and instead on the method for arriving at truth.

The foundation of his argument as a case for a different kind of knowledge deconstructed the permanence of his words and replaced his authority with an invitation to know the real authority of their genesis. This function of the text calls for the dialogue to be read on its own terms, even as it engaged with the Indian and European traditions of dialogue. De Nobili draws attention to the gap left open by his words—allowing even his mistakes to bring in his readers. Remaining open, a mistake became an opportunity for correction. This was what establishes a different kind of disposition for the text. The text destabilized the authority of its speaker and replaced it with a new kind of authority that was also accessible to readers. Rhetoric in this case must necessarily be defined beyond its very form and instead find further definition through processes of articulation and enactment. This disposition preceded the dialogue’s rhetorical conventions even as it was echoed in the contents of the dialogue, beginning with De Nobili’s central claim: Knowledge is participation in the destiny of man, *the* Reality, one both immanent and transcendent. Rather than being strictly rational, de Nobili’s dialogue attempted to move readers through its rhetoric just as much as through its logic. This move brought about a rhetoric that could withstand the pressures of cross-cultural difference because of its search for new forms of articulation through dialogue. De Nobili’s dialogue revealed the open-ended nature of his writings and his ability to create a context for early modern apologetics, one that was neither entirely European nor Indian.

***The Report on Certain Customs of the Indian Nation***

During his lifetime, de Nobili’s writing circulated in India between Madurai, Cranganore, and Goa, and in Europe between Portugal and Italy. Not a dialogue and not in Tamil, this writing mainly took the form of letters, reports, and Latin defenses of his missionary practices. De Nobili came under international scrutiny when Gonçalo Fernandes wrote to their superiors, suggesting that de Nobili was inciting a church schism. Fernandes attacked de Nobili for allowing converts to maintain “superstitious practices” and for distinguishing himself from Fernandes’s church in Madurai, but de Nobili defended his methods by sending letters and explanations to his superiors as well as his allies in Goa and Rome. Influential Catholic figures like Cardinal Bellarmino, the King of Portugal, and the chief inquisitors in Goa all made their own written judgements of de Nobili’s Madurai mission. The controversy dragged on until it was officially settled in de Nobili’s favor with Pope Gregory XV’s 1623 Apostolic Letter *Romanae Sedis Antistes*. While de Nobili became famous for composing beautiful songs and persuasive debates in Tamil, this international controversy traces a Catholic context for de Nobili’s work. De Nobili’s most renowned literary achievements composed in Tamil verse are no longer extant, while his political defenses and letters are. The record of the controversy is a rhetorical account, one aimed ultimately at persuading the Pontiff. Unlike the Tamil texts that preserve his real attempt to speak with locals, de Nobili’s Latin defenses frame the mission for his correspondents in a way that would convince them of his vision’s Christian core. Like his Tamil texts, they continue to demonstrate how de Nobili engaged with the rhetorical traditions around him, in this case, a tradition of Catholic apologetics, and betray the spiritual outlook that motivated his transgressive practices. This section analyzes de Nobili’s *Report on Certain Customs of the Indian Nation* (*Informatio de Quibusdam Moribus Nationis Indicae*) within the context of his communication with Europe. While presenting an anthropological account of India to Europe, De Nobili’s *Informatio* qualified his objective distance by close-reading Indian texts alongside Indian cultural practices. De Nobili ultimately was arguing that cultural forms had to be distinguished based on intent, and his argument embodied this distinction in its equal allegiance to form and spirit.

Roberto de Nobili wrote the *Report on Certain Customs of the Indian Nation* (*Informatio de Quibusdam Moribus Nationis Indicae*) around 1613, sending it to the Jesuit General Claudio Aquaviva in 1615 with the permission of the Archbishop of Cranganore, Francisco Ros. The *Report* laid out a defense for de Nobili’s methods of cultural adaptation, a rebuttal to Fernandes’ criticism and censures from church authorities in Goa, that attempted to clarify his underlying rationale to those who had criticized his approach as heretical and subversive. It presented an exhaustive explanation of local Indian customs and religious practices based in close readings of sacred scriptures. Focused on responding to criticism that interpreted his cultural accommodations as religious adaptation, de Nobili’s account made a clear distinction between religious and social customs, taking up the social significance of clothing, hair, and social class. In making his argument, de Nobili assumed that his audience was misinformed. The text was not about pure “*informatio*”; de Nobili’s defense aligned itself with European forms of logic and reason to bring his readers into the Indian context.

The *Report* first and foremost satisfied the demands of philosophic inquiry and theological rigor. The *Report* was divided into eleven chapters: 1) a description of the social structures of the Indian state according to civil law; 2) arguments in support of the view that the brahmins, by reason of their social rank and specific office, constitute the particular class of the learned; 3) the sciences which the brahmins pursue professionally; 4) the brahmin sects assessed from a religious standpoint; 5) the priesthood of the Indian nation; 6) certain customs connected with the brahmin caste; 7) the thread, the distinctive mark of the brahmins; 8) the tuft of hair, called kutami; 9) two other debated customs, the wearing of sandal paste and the scholar’s mark; 10) rules which should guide missionaries in adopting and making judgments about India’s social customs; and 11) the necessity of sanctioning customs prevalent in India, insofar as they are purely social. The *Report* was structured into a series of propositions that explained the role and responsibilities of Brahmins in order to distinguish the significance of their dress and customs as cultural rather than religious. These strict logical proofs provided a foundation for developing a definition of the subject matter.

This working structure was further followed within each chapter and betray de Nobili’s use of Thomistic logic to organize his case. Each main point was laid out in its own individual chapter, and each chapter began with a definition of terms. The text then unfolded as the factual presentation of new knowledge, sketching the outlines of Indian social customs for those unfamiliar*.* To take chapter one as an example, de Nobili addressed the “Social Structures of the Indian State According to Civil Law” through six supporting sub-sections. They were 1) Brahmins, 2) Kshatriyas, 3) Vaishyas, 4) Shudras, 5) Shudras are Subdivided into 6 Classes, and 6) Profession is Enforced by Law According to Caste. The chapter then provided a basic definition of the different Indian social classes based in texts like the *Laws of Manu* but following a logic similar to that used by Thomas Aquinas. As Amaladass and Clooneyhave pointed out, de Nobili’s argument for God used reasons found in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theoligicae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. In the *Report*, de Nobili also used the structure of Aquinas’s logical proofs. According to Aquinas, “the order of demonstration” always began with what was knowable by nature and proceeded from there to what was more obscure. This reasoning followed Aristotle’s *Physics* and was adapted by Aquinas in the *Posterior Analytics* (see *Physics,* 1,1; *Post. Anal*., lect. i, Leonine ed., I, 138). His *Summa Theologicae* followed this logic in setting out a demonstrable proof for the existence of God(Ia.2.2). This movement from the natural and physical to the abstract, the known to the unknown, explains de Nobili’s fastidious attempt to develop an understanding of the distinction between social and religious practices by first setting out concrete descriptions of the different classes and their manifest differences. Despite seeming more like an anthropological account of Indian society, this gradual movement from description towards reason carried along the logic of the *Report*’s superstructure and developed reasonable support for his methods of cultural accommodation. Furthermore, it amounted to carefully crafted definitions that were introductory without being elementary. These definitions and natural descriptions corrected misinformation about Indian culture without directly identifying themselves as counterarguments.

De Nobili makes a turn here. He begins to prioritize facts as Indian customs become an object of study. This turn, however, represents a direct response to his situation. De Nobili failed to win the support of the General Aquaviva with his *Apologia* in 1610. Even though Vico and Ros came to his defense, the General has also received reports from Goa that cast doubt on de Nobili’s practices. The General’s letter censured de Nobili for dissimulation and ostentation and requested that he consult Archbishop Ros about the propriety of accommodating social customs, like the caste thread, *kutumi*, baths, and use of sandal paste. Vico and de Nobili responded to the letter at the request of the Provincial, Pero Francisco. Francisco read the letter as condemning the mission, and he ordered de Nobili to stop baptisms and forbid converts from wearing the sandal paste, thread, and *kutumi*. Archbishop Ros also sent his own letter to Aquaviva in a long defense of de Nobili’s character and denouncing Francisco’s conspiracy against the mission. And because of the confusion over social customs—represented in Aquaviva’s response as well as Francisco’s accusations—Ros encloses de Nobili’s treatise on social customs (247). While Aquaviva most likely died before the letter and report ever reached him in 1615, the many exchanges that took place in 1613 demonstrate clear confusion surrounding de Nobili’s mission. Thus, while the *Report* could be read as an objective, anthropological account of India, it isn’t meant as such. Instead, de Nobili is responding to direct questions about Indian cultural practices.

De Nobili brought the different traditions together in other ways. He used Western sources to explain Indian traditions and qualified Western ideas with Indian sources. In his explanation of the Brahmin dress as a social custom, for instance, he proved his argument first by citing the testimony of western writers and then by explaining the social significance of Brahmin dress through its use. In this case, he cited the Brahmin investiture ceremony and supplemented this description with an excerpt from the *Laws of Manu*. He also cited the work of Strabo, Megasthenes, Nearcus, Clitarus, and Coelius of Rhodes. The *Laws of Manu* and these Western sources take on the same authority as important reference points for understanding culture and belief. De Nobili provided a way for readers to value both intellectual traditions by presenting one alongside and in addition to the other. This was central to de Nobili’s response to accusations against him—he needed to show he knew what he was talking about. He also needed to show that he knew what he was doing. De Nobili attacked the authority of common perception by providing both the internal and external evidence to prove it.

In using these texts, he was careful to provide translations and contextualize Sanskrit terms. In one last reference to the *Laws of Manu*, for instance, he provided a detailed explanation of the *Smriti* civil lawbook’s prescription of dress with a translation. He wrote:

Mark carefully that the words in the first text quoted above the author does not say, *nabhivyaharayed Brahmana svadhani*, i.e., ‘Let him beware encroaching upon the office of a Brahmin.’ Rather he says, *nabhivyaharayed brahma svadhani* (2.172), i.e., ‘Let him beware entering upon the office of wisdom.’ *Brahmana* signifies “a brahmin” whereas *brahma* means wisdom. (151)

De Nobili tried to show philological precision. Philology constituted part of the argument he was trying to make. Part of his case depended on connecting the Sanskrit word for knowledge “*brahma*” with “*Brahmin*”; this was supposed to demonstrate Brahmins were intellectuals rather than priests. At the same time, his argument did not wholly depend upon translation. Social practice grounded his argument and his references. His goal was not the mere translation of foreign words. He provided his own translations contextualized these translations within their usage. De Nobili used these kinds of texts alongside his understanding of common practice. To develop his claim that Brahmins were not a class of priests, he described the investiture ceremony that initiated Brahmins, as recorded in the *Àpastamba Sutra.* He outlined “the very formula used at the initiation ceremony” and then quoted a common proverb “*janman jayate shudrah, karmana jayate dvijah*” with a translation again, “i.e., ‘By birth he is born a plebeian; by the investiture of the thread he is born a brahmin’” (150). His textual references supplemented and interpreted practice. While de Nobili’s argument followed Thomistic logic and relied heavily on the careful use of both Western and Indian sources, his defense pointed towards action—that which seemed to lay beyond the text. And with this, he concluded that he had “proved the conclusion of our syllogism, namely, that the caste thread is the badge of office of a man of learning, of his right, i.e., his birthright, for the teaching of wisdom” (151). De Nobili was accused of subversive *actions*, and more than just defending the merits of his mission, his *Report* also carried the spirit of his mission. Within the text, he also reproduced his belief in the embodied practice of religion, within and against culture.

De Nobili concluded the text by making a final case for cultural adaptation, distinguishing Christian action through intent. De Nobili admitted that there were Indian customs that had no relation to civil or social value and instead had an exclusively religious purpose. For him, the *namam*, the symbol of Vishnu, and the *shobhacandanam*, the symbol of Krishna, were examples of religious practices in Indian society. In contrast, De Nobili argued, natural practices that had been overlaid with incantations or prayers didn’t condemn converts who still practiced them. These practices should, however, be stripped of superstition. Superstition could not be removed from India, but the distinction between a form motivated by superstitious belief and one motivated by Christian belief mattered (210). De Nobili cited the *Summa Theologicae* (Part II.II, Question 3): “in the use of any object, we should keep an eye on the specific end inherent in it, either of its own nature or by man’s assignment. For every human undertaking is governed by its end” (120). Belief had the power to change the form and subsequently shape action. This distinction between form and intent established the basis of De Nobili’s philosophy of cultural adaptation. He concluded, “if the whole substance of an action apart from any superimposed intention has an honest end, there is no reason why the action itself should be condemned and forbidden, Only the objectionable form, if any, is to be rejected” (211). He maintained the importance of social customs and local practice in spite of what would seem to be an obviously non-Christian cultural milieu. Thedifference that intention made was all the difference. This philosophy also determined the text itself.

Even though the text was aimed at silencing his critics, the *Report* carried de Nobili’s spirit of adaptation by ruminating on embodied religious practice through logical proofs and against his use of both Western and Indian sources.De Nobili’s conclusion demonstrated the Christian value he placed in his actions in spite of their misinterpretation. De Nobili’s performance of religious devotion, as Ines Županov has pointed out, revealed his favor for Jesuit theatrics and Ignatian spirituality. In addition to writing in Tamil and experimenting with Indian literary forms, De Nobili adopted the dress and habits that marked the Indian ascetic or *sanyasi*, constructed a new church in the Indian style, and allowed his converts to maintain their cultural dress. Unlike his Tamil texts, these theatrics were what was directly called into question by his peers. His *Report* attempted to make clear exactly why his theatrics carried Christian meaning. The *Report* gave equal value to Indian social practice and texts, but in the end, argued for a real consideration of the power of action to speak alongside words. The *Report* drew attention to the Christian value that actions could carry beyond any specific cultural bearing. De Nobili was making a case for embodied Christian rhetoric as a way to cut across cultural differences.

Of course, the reception of de Nobili’s text complicate this treatment of his intentions. De Nobili did win the favor of the Society’s general and the Pope, however, much of this support was garnered through the alliances that de Nobili mobilized in letters to family and friends. His uncle was the Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, his brother was also an important Roman preist, and his sister was a nun located in Rome. While de Nobili was writing his defenses, he was also sending letters to these allies to advocate for him at the Vatican. While de Nobili did succeed in Rome, he never won the favor of the Portuguese. Both the inquisition in Portugal and Goa denounced his methods, and it was these alliances made in Goa and Portugal formed his main opposition. Amorose’s observation that religion also represents resistance to rhetoric, in this sense, may be accurate. De Nobili’s methods were nothing less than controversial within the Catholic church.

**The Rhetorical Gap and a Total Transformation**

The dispersed yet deep record on de Nobili is a direct result of the controversy that plagued the early years of his mission. Many of his letters, narratives, and arguments were written in response to the scrutiny he was placed under. Yet what he remains most controversial for—his dress, vegetarian diet, and Indian-styled church—are visible only inasmuch as they are preserved in his writings and the several drawings that still remain. This conundrum is exactly the same one that the Pope found himself in when he forced to make a judgement on de Nobili’s missionary methods. Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, a family friend, himself wrote in a now lost letter to de Nobili, “.” Yet, de Nobili’s writing in Tamil and Latin—to audiences in India and Europe—points towards his material practices and must be understood alongside them. Taken together with his embodied rhetorical praxis, De Nobili’s writing suggests that Christianity required one to give up a sense of their own agency in order to participate in a truth that was at once transcendent and immanent. It is this paradoxical relationship between transcendence and immanence that rewrites rhetorical agency by envisioning rhetorical production through the lens of Ignatian spirituality. Rhetoric, in this sense, supersedes the self and instead depends upon the very difference that seems to estrange more traditional conceptions of agency.

De Nobili’s approach to adaptation was defined by a deep awareness of the power of social customs in India. In the *Report*, de Nobili explained that it was the Portuguese approach to conversion—in which converts were stripped of Indian social distinctions and customs—that had been one of the largest barriers to conversion. This practice stripped the very nature of conversion—the transformation of the person—of recognition by forcing converts to leave behind distinctive Indian marker of holiness. In this sense, Christian converts were misidentified as people who had lost faith instead of people who had gained faith. De Nobili urged his readers to consider this quandary of adaptation within a new light:

“Which man, then, will be induced at such a price to put on the livery of social degradation and contemptible social status? Conversely, who will deny that it is one’s first duty of charity, in view of the salvation of souls, to set aside that tenor of life into which one was born, second nature though it may have become to him, and to assume a different one, if this new way of acting is purely of a social character and entirely free from any moral force of attraction and has often been adopted by saintly men in cases of less urgency than ours here? To make oneself all to all [in social matters] has from earliest times been the policy of the apostles, did not deem it below his august dignity to move freely with those he came to save, and even to comport himself in their company with such familiarity that on this score he was adversely criticized by the Pharisees and leaders of the people” (223).

De Nobili’s believed that in separating itself from social distinctions, Christianity could allow for its own transformation amidst different social markers. He identified this as a “give and take,” where lessons could be learned from other cultures (223). The *Report* in this sense encouraged a new idiom of Christian action by calling attention to the meaning behind actions. De Nobili’s scripted dialogues drew attention to the gap between cultures but in foregrounding this gap, de Nobili invokes a place beyond the text where the word is animated by its enactment.

This place can be found within the biography of de Nobili’s life. Reports from fellow Jesuits and his superiors capture exactly what is promised by the text as proxy. His actions, with and against his words, produced a transformation, motivating a process of becoming shared between. Understood from this broader perspective, De Nobili’s actions depended upon the text opening up this gap. As an opening rather than an end, his texts qualified the viability of a single human perspective and suggested instead that meaning was co-constructed in dialogue, brought together through ecologies reaching *towards* a common union. It is the text as engaging *with* that motivated his rhetorical action—ending in a text transformed into action and a speaker and reader transformed by that action. Action became necessary because of its very ability to produce the transformation promised by the text, complicating, confirming, and contradicting text as truth. The promise of a physical recognition that could supersede and overcome the impasse of language became a primary motivation for De Nobili’s embodied engagement with local tradition. Where words failed, action provided a bridge to understanding. Action could operate on a level prior to translation in its adaptation to the recognizable cultural forms of local spiritual articulation not at odds with De Nobili’s own austerity.

De Nobili involved himself in a total embodiment of this adaptation. He changed what he himself consumed. He abstained from meat and other animal products considered impure. He also refused to drink alcohol, another form of spiritual pollution, to “persuade them more easily.” He instead ate only vegetables. He changed his appearance as well. He adopted the dress of a *sanyasi,* a person who renounced the world and led a life devoted to the spirit. His dress consisted of a long yellow robe with a yellow rochet of fine linens on top. Over his shoulder, he wore a red cloth, and on his head, he wore a white linen biretta. From his neck hung three threads of gold and two of white linen with a cross (see Figure 1). He physically—both inside and out—embodied a new culture. He also relocated himself in space. He moved houses and then avoided leaving his house. He kept himself from seeing visitors in order to show his devotion to contemplation and chastity. He constructed an entirely new compound that connected his house to a church that maintained separate spaces for different castes while also foregrounding his removal from the natural world (see Figure 2). This was another kind of spatial adaptation that reproduced physical asceticism. When he did receive visitors, only after they had repeated their request to see him several times, De Nobili received them through local ceremony. He sat on a raised platform covered in red cloth with another cloth spread on the ground in front of him and then a mat of straw. His visitors then bowed three times to him, “raising their joined hands to the head, and then lowering them in a profound inclination to indicate that they desired to become his disciples,” prostrating themselves on the ground, and then finally standing. De Nobili’s practice was not just an outward form but became a new kind of being in the world. He became defined by the recognition of the local population. In attempting to reach an understanding, he adapted his being and not just his words. This move from text to body cannot be reduced to appearance alone. It instead involved a real interaction between him and his surroundings and therefore reflects the inter-animation of De Nobili and his environment. It was the exchange and engagement of one with the other. De Nobili’s words became his actions, which ended in his own transformation.

In this sense, De Nobili also draws on the dialectic structure of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Loyola’s *Exercises* were the product of his own experience of conversion and led to the founding of the Society of Jesus, commonly referred to as the Jesuits. Jesuits were to go through the *Exercises* during their own formation and were encouraged to return to the retreat throughout their lives. The *Spiritual Exercises* integrate dialogue into its very structure; it is the constant exchange between the exercitant and their director that guides the retreat and, arguably, the spiritual development of the exercitant. The text follows the dialectic between good and evil throughout as a way for participants to distinguish the direction of their lives and make decisions. The ultimate goal of the text is to allow the exercitant to recognize the presence of God within themselves and then to move them towards recognizing God’s presence in the world and reproducing that presence through their own Christian action. For de Nobili, it is within this move to action that knowledge reproduces itself and confirms its validity.

De Nobili’s embodied production of faith only increased as his life went on. This embodiment was generative. During his old age, he was relocated to Sri Lanka for the better climate. While there, however, “his zeal soon impelled him into new apostolic works as tiring as those which his Superiors wanted to relieve him of.” And it was this zeal that moved the locals, “the holiness and the character of an apostle, the charm of his words and the beauty of his talent, won him all heart” (Proença). He soon was removed to Mylapore, which would be his final post. His “austerity” again extended to his living quarters, “he built for himself in a garden situated outside the fort a small earthen cabin covered with palm leaves” (Proença). Dependent upon his surroundings for his own definition, de Nobili became more than himself and more than these forms. In transcending the confines of the speaker and the presumed agency it provided, he became co-constructed. He came to occupy the role of listener as well and was transformed in this openness.

Antony Vico, formerly the chair of Theology at the College of Cochin, joined de Nobili’s mission in 1609 to help support his growing church. His first report of the mission captured the way in which de Nobili’s actions demonstrated a changed heart:

If I did not see it with my own eyes and touch it with my own hands, I would call it the ideal perfection of the missionary, that should be aspired to but cannot be attained. … Seeing this wonderful combination of eminent qualities, I think it would be an insult to the divine liberality, if I did not ascribe them to a very special grace and an extraordinary gift of the Divine Goodness, rather than to the natural talents of Father Robert. Those incomparable external gifts are ennobled and sanctified in him by still more precious qualities. I mean, the interior virtues which adorn his soul. His humility, modesty, spirit of faith, gentle affability, exquisite sense if piety and love of God, spread around him such a sweet perfume that in spite of my miseries, since I have the happiness of enjoying his presence, I feel inundated with spiritual delights. (Vico to Aquaviva, 25 October 1610)

This change increased with time. His internal devotion only intensified. In his old age, he confined himself further to his hut and lived on a diet of boiled bitter herbs, only spending his remaining time in prayer, contemplation, and the dictation of his works. When he lost his eyesight, his prayers and dictations only increased. Fellow Jesuit, Antonio di Proença wrote, before reporting his death:

What proves his sanctity more than these marvels are the fruits he produced, and the virtues of which his life was a continuous exercise. This austere penance which he never discarded, this de Nobility of character which made him overcome all dangers and sufferings, an incredible meekness which made him accept not only from the heathen but from the virtuous and learned men all kinds of contempt, accusations and infamy, without experiencing the least feeling of anger or bitterness towards them, as he ingenuously confessed; a loving devotion to the Holy Virgin, an ardent love for Jesus crucified; a constant union [this is what overcomes fatigue] with God amid fatigue and worries of a most dissipating life; humility and obedience [this is what transforms obedience into will] which shone forth in almost all his letters and still more radiantly in all his conduct, finally his self-mastery, the serenity of his face and affable manners which joined with the dignity of a high stature, the de Nobility of a majestic gait, inspired all who dealt with him with benevolence and commanded a kind of veneration; that is what constitutes the sanctity of that true apostolic man, one of the greatest missionaries of the Society of Jesus. (Proença)

Yet this transformation invited in the other and invited its return, a mimesis of one with the other. Action, in this sense, transcends form because it has the ability to be read against itself. Transformation marks a change, and this change creates meaning that need not be translated nor defined by its outward form. It need only depend on a comparison with itself. This transformation is further dependent upon and fueled by the promise of comparison, a difference that is networked, shared, and then re-constructed—difference that becomes different. This state of affairs shows how difference is productive, that it need not be overcome but rather invites engagement, which invites enactment, which begets a transformation.

When understood as rhetorical, this movement between and with ends in transformation that defines education. De Nobili’s converts completed this kind of reciprocity. After remarking on de Nobili’s piety, Vico made a point to recount the actions of converts:

With their knowledge these converts combine such a great devotion and attachment to Our Lord that I am amazed. This piety appears in their discourses and in their actions. When you speak with them you must be very careful, for as soon as they hear the Holy Names of Jesus, of Mary, of the Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Trinity, they raise their joined hands before their breast as a sign of respect. When they meet one another or one of our Christians, I mean those of our church, or from the Coast, Portuguese or Topas, they salute them by saying *Sasu Nadarukku Mangalam*, … praised be the Lord Jesus. (Vico to Aquaviva, 25 October 1610)

Rather than the mere relation of information, texts require a subsequent change in the actors that becomes the difference. Upon visiting de Nobili, Father Buccerio wrote about the genuine different de Nobili’s instruction created within his converts:

They follow the instructions of the Aiyer for several months and when they are fully convinced, they ask to be baptized, with no other motive than to please God and obtain their eternal salvation. The Aiyer never gives anything to his converts on that occasion; they on the contrary bring small offerings to the Church such as flowers etc. It is not much; yet it causes some envy among us who are always worried by the petitions of our converts both at the time of baptism and after.

After meeting these converts, Buccerio was taken aback. He admitted, “I cannot describe with what affection all those Christians received me, still less the consolation they gave me.” Within this scenario, human will disintegrates in order to transcend difference by transcending first and foremost the self. This dialogue depends further on the environment, drawing meaning from the diversity of resources surrounding, enveloping, and subsuming the rhetor. The rhetor, the audience, the context, and the text all become inter-animated nodes that together communicate understanding in their ability to co-construct each other and affect something new and different—greater than what existed before, what once had been separate. This is the co-construction of meaning across difference, where each necessarily provides a new and different potential for agency and power because it is first required that everything be shared.

Translingual scholars like Suresh Canagarajah have pointed out that people “are not relying on words alone for meaning. They are aligning features in the environment, such as objects, bodies, setting, and participants” (27). As Jay Jordan, however, has deftly implied, “aligning translingual composition with a material rhetorical perspective pulls the subjective ground from under composers” (375). What once were resources to be exploited for rhetorical purposes become “unexpected actants cocreating agency” through “humans-as-resources” (377). This places subjectivity immanently within a field of play that exceeds the conscious and requires immersion as well as a particular kind of extroversion. Yet, I want to suggest that rather than stripping humans of their agency, a materialist perspective can renew our sense of humanity in its emphasis on immanence. In particular, the work of the Jesuits in India constructs a counter-narrative to the friction created by the emergence of the modern self in Europe during the seventeenth century. This kind of rhetorical immanence, where rhetoric emerges between and amongst humans, non-humans, and the environment, depends upon the very difference that seems to estrange more traditional conceptions of rhetorical agency and promises new ways of being-in-the-world that re-constitute the human as always in conversation with another. Here, it becomes clear why translingualism resists language as a fixed entity. And it becomes clear why rhetoric has exceeded the physical limits of the human. As the rhetorical practice of De Nobili demonstrates, when rhetoric is practiced across borders, it requires a change that fundamentally destabilizes the rhetorical situation, taking stable notions of language and identity along with it. However, as De Nobili’s life also suggests, this does not mean that agency is lost. Rather, instead, it is found to exist within and among other things.

**Conclusion**

Roberto de Nobili’s texts ask to be read in conversation. The information they contain is not only qualified by the author himself, but also written against itself through its very structure. In almost every way, the text asks to be taken not at its word but as a promise for more—for actions, for its audience, and for its own remaking. What does this mean for de Nobili’s mistake? When text is seen as defined by its enactment, monolithic in its articulation, these mistakes persist as unhappy accidents. They mark de Nobili’s words as untrustworthy and de Nobili as unreliable, perhaps even dangerous. When the text is understood instead as an invitation into the mysterious Reality, where Truth exists within yet always beyond the text, where truth is both the means and form of transformation, De Nobili’s mistake can also be taken as an invitation. This invitation draws attention to human fallibility and the incomplete nature of the self. In this sense, it forces the audience to make a move and participate with the author in overcoming both the self and its ambivalence. The text cannot solve differences. Difference pervades the act itself, especially its mistakes, in order to call one outside of the self and open up a dialogue. Rather than being defined by the incongruity of two perspectives, mistakes can become productive spaces for negotiation when the burden of proof shifts away from the text and is shared between the rhetor and audience. The text and all parties involved are human, open to err. But this is the point—the beauty of it all. Misunderstanding is not an end but only a beginning.

These kinds of mistakes or incongruities litter most kinds of cross-cultural work. The advances of comparative rhetoric have foregrounded this. In the *RSQ* special issue on comparative rhetoric, Swearingen attests that within new studies of rhetorical praxis across the world, what emerges as important is “An actively dialectical meta-discursive third based on ‘lived, holistic experience’ beyond the borders of the individual and national identities presents itself across the readings collected here” (307). This suggestion draws attention to the fact, for her, that “the distinction between us and them, self and other, if directed at ‘individualism’ let us say, or ‘agency,’ relies heavily upon a post-Cartesian enlightenment ideal of individual interiority” (307). This chapter builds upon the way in which Mary Garrett reads back the incongruities of comparative rhetoric upon herself, the researcher, in this issue. It picks up Dominic Ashby’s focus on facts of ‘non’-usage but rather than reading them alongside facts of usage in order to develop inside-outside positionalities, this chapter instead attempts to develop an understanding of rhetorics that cross cultures by creating constellations of meaning. In contrast to Bo Wang’s “geopolitical approach” to comparative rhetorical studies, however, it suspends the interrogation of global power structures and economic systems in an attempt to resist the specter of agency and control. In other words, for the moment, it deconstructs the self/other binary by resisting the stasis of the self. This is not to suggest that the forces of economic or political systems do not act upon rhetoric or that many rhetorical acts are guided by a desire for power of some kind. But rather, this deliberate disavowal is an attempt at imagining ways that rhetorical action might reach for something other than the power of the state, the economy, or the self. The humble—perhaps overly optimistic—hope is that this might also provide a way into discovering a platform where the other can find a voice that emerges from something other than its own othering.

This chapter is also an attempt at recovering a more generous treatment of Christian rhetoric as liberating rather than limiting. By reading the work of De Nobili through his religious beliefs, it becomes easier to see how his Christian faith motivated his rhetorical action. Furthermore, it becomes easier to see how religious rhetoric might be able to function successfully when our notions of rhetoric and rhetorical power shift to include religious frameworks. Furthermore, when we move beyond the religious, we can begin to see the ethical implications embedded within cross-cultural work—the way in which the ethics of engagement define the success and failure of cross-cultural rhetoric. These are ethical implications that scholars like Xiaoye You have recently fought for within rhetorical studies. As rhetoric continues to engage people across borders and the power structures that many other rhetoricians have focused on, the ethical if not religious valences of rhetorical work must continue to be pursued. The work of de Nobili provides one way to interpret the possibilities of this future in spite of and perhaps even because ofits dangers. When incongruity is placed at the dialectic heart of rhetoric, then, a reimagined ethics of cross-cultural exchange reconfigure current conceptions of rhetorical agency as well. To follow De Nobili beyond the outer limits of the self requires me to repeat a similar move that rhetoricians have recently made to conceptualize rhetoric as embodied, taking place across time within material ecologies, and connect this move to work that crosses more identifiable cultural borders.

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Notes

1. Francis Xavier Clooney and Soosai Arokiasamy have used the work of de Nobili as one way into imagining comparative theology. See Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God* and Arokiasamy, *Dharma, Hindu and Christian According to Roberto De Nobili* for a comparison of Hindu and Christian concepts of divinity. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to Thomas Amorose, Lynch and Miller point to the work of Sharon Crowley, Maxine Hairston, David Bleich, Chris Anson, and Keith Gilyard as examples of work that has taken a critical stance towards religion. This work has suggested in one way or another that religious belief conflicts with academic inquiry and often can constrain the creative and critical capacities of students. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Notably, the 2007 and 2008 plenary addresses of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric responded to the “return” of religion by encouraging rhetoric scholars to find new ways of thinking about religion. And in 2005, Stanley Fish identified religion as the next area of humanistic inquiry, one that could conceivably displace the humanities’ preoccupation with race, class and gender. Scholars have responded to this call with a flurry of recent collections that investigate writing and spirituality, *The Spiritual Side of Writing* (1997), and pursue religion’s place in the academy, *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief*(2000) and its role in inquiry, *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry*(2001). Recent collections have also investigated religion’s place in the writing class, *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*(2005), questioned the Christian tradition’s influence on rhetoric, *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition*(2014), and set out to map the terrain of Christian rhetoric, *Mapping Christian Rhetorics*(2015). Scholars have painted a complicated picture of the relationship between faith and rhetoric. While scholars have provided new ways to integrate religion into the teaching of writing (DePalma, Kirsch, Perkins), Jeffrey Ringer’s *Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civic Discourse* complicates any easy relationship between religion and civic engagement. And, Thomson-Bunn’s recent research suggests that negative views towards religion still persist in the academy despite advances in the study of religion. However, T.J. Geiger’s work suggests that inquiry into the spiritual is an essential part of academic rigor and provides an opportunity for students and researchers to reflect and invest personally in their work [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A notable exception is Steven B. Katz’s chapter in *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetorics,* which re-defines rhetoric through a careful reading of the Hebrew language and scriptures. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Methodology has arguably formed the central concern of comparative rhetoric, see Mao, Wang, and Garrett for classic examples. Scholarship on religion and rhetoric has focused more on pedagogical methodologies. Bizzell pointed out as early as 2008 that scholars needed to examine their own religious standpoint within their research on religion. Answering this call, Catherine Pavia and others featured in the 2015 double issue of *Written Communication* focus exclusively on establishing and examining methodologies for writing research about religion.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Saulière’s *His Star to the East* is the most detailed biography of his life, mainly composed of direct quotations from his letters and missionary reports and thorough in accounting for the gaps in the archival record. Vincent Cronin’s biography *A Pearl to India* summarizes this earlier text, even though it is more widely available today. Although shorter, Svarimuthu Rajamanickam’s published dissertation, *The First Oriental Scholar*, also provides an in-depth account of de Nobili’s life based in archival research and includes some of de Nobili’s original writings with translations. Ines Županov’s *Disputed Mission* provides the most recent account of de Nobili’s life, focused on interpreting his letters with and against the politics of the Jesuit mission and the demands of early modern epistemology. Županov distinguishes her work as the first to provide a non-apologetic account of de Nobili. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. De Nobili’s explanation of knowledge depends on Aristotle’s theory of the soul and perception from *De Anima*. From this perspective, knowledge is based in direct perception, what can be “known” is only what can be perceived by the mind or drawn up mentally. Unlike knowledge, inference allows humans to go beyond direct perception by inferring from what is perceived either what resembles perception or does not resemble perception. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)