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Persuasion Strategies of Jesuit Preachers

among the Gentiles

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In Brazil and Asia, a major challenge the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries had to face was their unpreparedness to speak the native languages. Hence, to translate the basics of the catechism, a few prayers, and their own sermons, not only did they use local interpreters but they also developed new strategies of persuasion that included a careful study of native languages. Though not proficient in native languages, Jesuits were knowledgeable enough about human nature and the universal art of persuasion to communicate effectively across cultures. A close reading of various sixteenth-century epistolographic and historiographic sources discloses how deeply sacred oratory practices were shaped by such meetings of cultures and by their audience's own cultural background, while remaining in keeping with the doctrine concerning the actio. The cross-cultural character of the sacred rhetorical doctrine in which Jesuit preachers were schooled stands out in many sources. For instance, Father João de Azpilcueta Navarro, famous for his facility to communicate with Brazilian Indians, "would pour out the torrent of his eloquence by raising his voice to preach the mysteries of faith, with his hands outstretched and pausing to stare at them with awe, in the same manner as was customary among [the native] preachers" (Simão de Vasconcelos, Crónica da Companhia de Jesus, 2 vols. [Petrópolis: Vozes, 1977 (1663)], l: 221).

Unpreparedness to speak native languages was a major challenge that the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries had to grapple with in Brazil and Asia. However proficient they were in Sacred Scripture, natural philosophy, the humanities and rhetoric, classical Greek and Latin literature, newly arrived



¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Twentieth Biennial Conference of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric (ISHR), held in Tübingen, Germany, July 28–31, 2015. The special theme of the conference was "Rhetoric across Cultures."

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Jesuits felt helplessly unable to communicate in the native language of prospective converts. Fully aware that the lack of that communication tool might jeopardize the whole mission project, the missionaries would not give up. To translate the basics of the catechism, together with a few prayers and sermons, not only did they resort to local interpreters2 but they also developed new strategies of persuasion that included a careful study of native languages (e.g., Tupi in Brazil, Malabar in India, etc.). All this amounted to the first missionary encounter with these non-European languages, from which the earliest artes de língua developed.

João de Azpilcueta Navarro: Evangelizing on "a blank sheet of paper"

One of the earliest documents from Jesuits in Brazil was written by Father Manuel da Nóbrega (1517-70) in August 1549, a few months after the missionaries had arrived there. Nóbrega's letter is addressed to Martin de Azpilcueta Navarro (1492-1586), the internationally renowned professor of canon law at the University of Coimbra.3 As a former student of Professor Navarro, Nóbrega maintained a longstanding friendship with him. Among other subjects, the letter refers to a missionary who was a nephew of Navarro, Father João de Azpilcueta Navarro (1522-57), one of the earliest linguists of colonial Brazil, and famous also for his skill in chatting with the Indians. This is Father Manuel da Nóbrega's testimony about his fellow Jesuit, a few months after their arrival:

Father João Navarro is always busy out in the villages, where he spends the night and takes meals so he finds it easier to preach in the evening, as this is the moment natives gather to get some rest; he has already learnt their language (one very similar to Biscayan [spoken in the Basque region of Spain]), and so he manages to make himself understood by them.⁴

According to this document, by August 1549 Father João Navarro was already proficient in a "Brazilic" dialect. So great is Father Nóbrega's awe at such a linguistic achievement that he compares his fellow Jesuit to another Jesuit from Navarra, also Azpilcueta Navarro's relative, St. Francis Xavier (1506-52), the Apostle of the Indies.

In his first letter to the Provincial of Portugal, Nóbrega reports the following: "I preach to the Governor and his people in the newly founded town [of Salvador da Bahia], while Father Navarro preaches to the people of the land" (Nóbrega 1988, 72). The letter shows that from the very beginning the missionaries were keenly aware of two quite different persuasion programs: one meant for the Portuguese, the old Christian colonists, and another meant for the Indians, the mamelucs (white and Indian "half-breeds"), and the slaves. They preached the same Gospel, yet to two dramatically different audiences.

In depicting Brazil to his former teacher, Father Nóbrega expresses his first impressions of the peoples he has encountered, and provides a few hints about a prospective evangelization:

[S]ome literacy would be enough around here, as it all is like a blank sheet of paper. ... They never abandon us; on the contrary, everywhere we will go they are always willing to come with us, in awe at everything we preach and listening in great silence. (Nóbrega 1998, 94)

Soon, however, the missionaries were grappling with the practical difficulties of evangelization, such as finding a suitable name to call God when speaking to indigenous peoples with no sense of spiritual worship whatsoever:

These Gentiles worship nothing in the world nor know God at all; the best we can expect from them is hearing them call Tupane the thunder, meaning by that "a divine thing." And so "Father Tupane" is the only convenient word we can find to make God known to them. (Nóbrega 1998, 99)

The narrowness of the native languages to express Christian faith was felt by all missionaries, and this difficulty actually enhanced the need to study the mother tongues of the Indians. Furthermore, the missionaries began to realize that the fruit they were producing was insignificant, for they were failing to eradicate the brutal customs of peoples whom they believed

 $^{^{2}}$ Local interpreters were known as topazes in India, chalona and tangoman in Guinea, and languages in Brazil.

 $^{^{\}scriptscriptstyle 3}$ Martin de Azpilcueta Navarro lived out his last days in Rome, earning an exceptional retirement pension of a thousand gold crusaders per year, which in 1585 still caused perplexity (Ramalho 1998, 179).

 $^{^4}$ Nóbrega 1998, 88–96. The original letter seems to have been lost. The text corresponds

lacked the inner disposition towards matters of faith. To make matters worse, there was a further impediment which Father Manuel da Nóbrega boldly denounces in his letters: the lack of credibility that Christians enjoyed, due to their bad example of life, the lack of truth in their words, and the ruthlessness of their behavior.5 Nóbrega's finger points also at the established clergy in Brazil, whom he labels "demons." Therefore, he was convinced that the farther all the Jesuits could stay from old Christian residents, the more fruit their efforts would yield.⁷

Between Brahmans and Bonzes: "In the Japanese nation, the nation that lived under reason more than any other Gentile nation from those parts"

Dramatically different was the situation in the Asian missions. In St. Francis Xavier's Asia, missionaries used scholarly disputes, together with their philosophical, rational, and dialectical sophistication, based on systematic argumentation, as their indispensable weapons. In India, Xavier would visit Hindu shrines and engage in philosophical discussion with their priests about the essentials of Brahmanic theology. Some of these discussions were held at St. Paul's Church in the Indian-Portuguese colony of Goa, featuring Jesuit missionaries such as Gonçalves da Silveira and Francisco Rodrigues. In the southwest Indian city of Cochim (today's Kochi), Fr. Henrique Henriques (1520-1600) was preparing, in 1548, his Art of the Malabar Language (Henriques 2013) with a view to combatting the religious beliefs of the Brahmans, so as "to show with reasonable arguments the lies they worship and believe in," as he openly admitted in a letter written in October 1548 to Fathers Ignatius of Loyola and Simão Rodrigues (Belinquete 2011, 410).

The philosophical and literary training of these humanist-missionaries must have sharpened their appetite for impassioned disputations, as illustrated by Fr. Henriques's defiant statement:

Bring over to me one or two hundred from your eldest, best trained Priests: on my own and young as I am, I do want to fight against them and make the truth known to them! (Belinquete 2011, 410).

The disputations between Francis Xavier and the bonzes (Buddhist monks) of the court of the Japanese feudal lord Ōtomo Sōrin (1530-37), referred to in Jesuit records as the "King of Bungo," are depicted by ex-Jesuit Fernão Mendes Pinto in his Peregrinaçam (Pilgrimage), a one-of-a-kind sixteenthcentury Portuguese literary work published posthumously in 1614. This autobiographical account is one that experts on the early Society of Jesus in the Far East all too often fail to revisit, even though it belongs in its own right to the collection of Jesuit sources. The disputations waged by Francis Xavier against the bonzes of the King of Bungo's court are narrated in the final chapters of Peregrinaçam.8 The scene depicted clearly resembles an academic debate: between Xavier, the maître ès arts from the University of Paris, and Fucarandono, the supreme bonze "in the Japanese nation, the nation that lived under reason more than any other Gentile nation from those parts."9

On one side was Francis Xavier, the member of an Order that sent to the Council of Trent its high-profile theologians; on the opposite side, Fucarandono, a graduate of Fiancina, the top-ranking Japanese seat of learning, where he had then spent thirty years as a high-profile teacher. In short, the Western sage found himself face to face with the Asian sage. From a certain viewpoint, this episode constitutes the culminating moment of Mendes Pinto's book: the ex-Jesuit Mendes Pinto portrays the triumph of the Christian faith over the bonze's mythological narratives, a triumph achieved through the art of persuasion—which Francis Xavier handled masterfully, almost himself embodying the Word! In the eyes of Mendes Pinto-an adventurous merchant and ex-soldier who became a Jesuit in order to carry on the exceptional work of his friend, Francis Xavier-

⁵ This was the case "so much so that all the things that were said, [the Gentiles] believed were chicanery or deception." Letter from Manuel da Nóbrega to Simão Rodrigues in 1550. See Nóbrega 1998, 108.

⁶ Nóbrega 1998, 116. Here Nóbrega was referring to the fact that, while clergy members would tolerate situations of concubinage among Christians, they would do nothing to rescue Indian slaves.

⁷ This regret is frequent in Nóbrega's letters: the little help and the great hindrance coming from Christians (Nóbrega 1998, 174, 132, 172, 175), which enhanced the natural feeling of fear in peoples subject to superstition and credulity.

⁸ Mendes Pinto 1984, CCXI, CCXII, and CCXIII.

⁹ Mendes Pinto 1984, CCXII, 629-30.

the debate involved two titans of knowledge, both of them educated in the most recognized theological schools of their time, albeit ones that were located, both geographically and religiously, worlds apart. Despite the bonzes' reliance on their outstanding academic degrees, the King of Bungo, in his capacity as referee of the debate, declared Francis Xavier to be the winner. 10 Mendes Pinto regards this example as the paradigm for the evangelization of the Gentiles.

The models that such debates drew upon—disputations in which the actors were all too well acquainted with the academic code-could only be waged by theologians and philosophers in European colleges and universities. These disputations were based on dialectical argumentation and followed the canons of classical eloquence and rhetoric. In describing the debate, Mendes Pinto therefore portrays Francis Xavier not only as a missionary ardent in his desire to teach the Gospel to the Gentiles but as a Master of Arts from the University of Paris, educated from his teens at Saint Barbara College until he completed the philosophy and humanities program and became a teacher of Aristotelian philosophy at Beauvais College. Xavier is thus depicted as an authoritative master of ethics and of persuasion. He is the soldier of the Word and of reason—in short, the exact opposite of Mendes Pinto's representation of a contumacious, rough Fucarandono, Xavier's Japanese counterpart in the debate.

For such a learned audience as the Japanese, the sermon played also a critical role as an instrument of persuasion. Here I mention only the sermon preached by the Jesuit Brother Juan Fernandez (Córdova, 1526-67) to another young feudal lord, referred to in Jesuit sources as the "King of Omura." In explaining the painting on a fan that the Jesuits had given the King of Omura as a gift, the Jesuit Brother took seriously the king's desire to know the meaning of the symbols depicted on the fan and expostulated on the essentials of the Christian faith, with clear aesthetical concerns. 11

What about Brazil? Sharing clothing and haircuts "until we all looked like them" because "likeness brings about love"

In Brazil, we certainly find no theological debate, no sacred book, no shrine, no learned priest among the Indians. Still, a desire to learn was there! Indian boys and sons of the colonists alike would come to the missionaries and, along with studying the catechism, learn to read, write, and sing. The earliest schools were established for the purposes of literacy and catechesis. However, since not everything was actually favorable in that "blank sheet of paper," soon the first impressions of an easy task ahead would vanish. The illiterate condition of the Gentile was perceived as an impenetrable obstacle, apparently impervious to the Christian doctrine, to such an extent that Bishop Pedro Fernandes Sardinha (1497-1556) even became skeptical about Indians ever becoming able to convert. Under their nasty customs-mainly cannibalism, which was demonized by missionaries¹²—there was room neither for a political authority nor for an organized religion, and the "untamed atavism" and state of intellectual unsophistication in which the Indians were found made them look as though they were "closer to beasts than man," as Nóbrega and his fellow Jesuit missionary José de Anchieta (1534-97, canonized in 2014) at times put it.

Nonetheless, we ought not ignore the fact that in Nóbrega's Dialogue on the Conversion of the Gentiles (Diálogo sobre a Conversão do Gentio), his understanding is fully at odds with such a drastic view. On the contrary, he argues that although a sophisticated civilization is sometimes useful for conversion, at other times it becomes an obstacle. Actually, Nóbrega claims that the biggest hindrance to evangelization lies in Portuguese-born old Christians, because they expected to take advantage of the Indians eating and robbing each other to seize their slaves and their lands. Nóbrega claims that the old Christians were opposed to religious instruction of the Indians, "so they served better their own [that is, the colonists'] convenience" (Nóbrega 1988, 221). After more than ten years of fighting against cannibalism, Nóbrega managed to persuade Governor Mem de Sá to forbid cannibalism and arrest those guilty of that crime. In this way the



¹⁰ Mendes Pinto 1984, CCXI, 624-25.

¹¹ The fan was decorated with the symbol of the Society of Jesus: the name JESU with a cross on top and three nails below. See Belinquete 2011, 467-68.

¹² Heineberg 2013: 107.

conditions were created to build villages where Indians could be instructed in the catechism and subsequently pledge allegiance to the Christian faith not out of fear, but as a result of instruction.

With respect to missionary methods, Jesuits in Brazil resorted to principles not much unlike those used by their fellow Jesuits in the Asian missions: local customs not incompatible with the Gospel were adopted, while those that clashed outright with the Christian faith were to be rejected.13

Fathers Manuel da Nóbrega and João Navarro were among the first to discover the Indians' love of music and singing, as well as the magical and religious role it played in their oral cultures. Nóbrega also took upon himself the defense of his views on cultural adaptation against the criticism leveled by Bishop Pedro Fernandes Sardinha, who doubted the Indians' ability to learn the catechism and become Christians. 14

As a result, Nóbrega decided that College of Orphans boys sent from Lisbon should be raised with gentile boys, and bring to the latter the knowledge of the chants they had learned back in Lisbon. Besides the psalms and the motets of the liturgy, the Catholic orphans from Lisbon, the mamelucs, and many Indian boys would sing both in Latin and in Portuguese. 15 While the orphans were learning to play maracás and taquaras, the Indian and mameluc boys would learn to play the flute, the pipe, the triangle, and other percussion instruments. In addition to the musical plays and the chants, there were also the dances, with multicolored feathers adorning otherwise naked bodies. But what really made the bishop

uncomfortable was the Indians singing to God "in their own language, and in their own tone," and "play[ing] the same musical instruments used in their feasts as they killed their enemies or go drunk" (Nóbrega 1988, 142).16 At stake was, as Nóbrega explains, embracing some customs not at odds with the Christian faith, in order to attract the Gentiles and lead them to give up other customs which were indeed at odds with the faith. For that very reason, the Portuguese boys' hair was cut after the manner of the Gentiles, not the manner of Europeans, and the few pieces of clothing available were shared with those who became Christians "until we all looked like them" (Nóbrega 1988, 75), because, as Nóbrega adds, "likeness brings about love" (Nóbrega 1988, 142).

The idea that likeness brings about love was actually known from the Thomist tradition. What perhaps was unprecedented in Scholasticism was Nóbrega's brilliant insight that people who had lived naked for thousands of years could not be prevented from becoming Christians because nobody could know when so many Gentiles would manage to get dressed (Nóbrega 1988, 142). With a sharp sense of humor, Nóbrega explains himself in his first letter to the Provincial: "[our Coimbra brethren would be scandalized] if they came to know that a soul cannot become Christian and know her creator for lacking a pair of underpants" (Nóbrega 1988, 74).

Preaching in the Indian Manner

Fully aware of the advantage of embracing Gentile customs as a way of demonstrating proximity among equals, the missionaries did not fail to devote considerable attention to the local customs of oratory, so that a greater benefit would result from their preaching. Their letters reveal that Jesuits found a way of their own to preach, which they call "in their manner" (i.e., in the Indian manner). The phrase is used in connection both with the Indian "Principal" (Nóbrega 1988, 179) and with the missionary who learned it from him. What was distinct about the Indian manner of preaching was neither the subject matter nor the structure or the figures of speech, but rather the tone of voice, the gesture, the body language.

¹³ The cultural adaptation model had been incipiently adopted by Francis Xavier and developed by Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) in Valignano's Advertimentos e avisos acerca dos costumes e catangues de Jappão (1581-82); see Valignano 1946. For the purpose of integrating into Japanese society, the Jesuits eventually became closely associated with the bonzes' social group.

¹⁴ In Nóbrega 1988, 203–4, further measures taken by Mem de Sá, governor-general of Brazil from 1557-72, are mentioned in connection with the good governance of Christians and Gentiles. In the same vein, from the sixteenth century onwards, the Portuguese crown enacted legislation in favor of the indigenous population, which nonetheless could not be implemented because it clashed with the colonists' economic interests. Hence the Jesuits were in ongoing conflict with both the authorities and the colonists as they strove to protect the rights of the Indians.

¹⁵ In 1551–52, the Jesuit high school at Bahia (Colégio dos Meninos de Jesus) had a school of Declamation and Chant run by Father Francisco Pires, a former regular canon from Holy Cross Monastery in Coimbra, Portugal (Leite 1965, 64).

¹⁶ Father Anchieta also made use of indigenous dances and songs, accompanied by their instruments. In catechesis and in Christian feasts, he would adapt Christian texts to the choreographic forms most common among the Indians (Belinquete 2011, 603).

The best preacher in the Indian manner was, again, Father João Navarro. According to Simão de Vasconcelos's testimony, Fr. Navarro would set out in the evening to meet the Indians as they returned home from hunting; after dining with them,

in order to please and persuade them, he would pour out the torrent of his eloquence by raising the voice to preach the mysteries of faith, with his hands outstretched and pausing to stare at them with awe, in the same manner as was customary among [the native] preachers. (Vasconcelos 1977, I: 221)

As a personal witness himself of his fellow Jesuit's performance skill, this is how Nóbrega depicts Navarro's way of preaching:

[H]e preached in their [Indian] manner, with a certain tone, walking and beating his breast as they do when they want to persuade and say something very effectively. (Nóbrega 1988, 142)

Whence did such a clear-cut codification of the gesture, the tone, the pausing, and so forth come if not from classical rhetoric's codification of the actio? Whence did the attention to musical expression and body language flow if not from doctrine on the kind of actio required for persuasion? When he preached in the Tupi language, Fr. João Navarro's manner of preaching was dramatically different from his manner of preaching in Portuguese. He adapted his own manner to suit the gentile manner of preaching: aloud, "almost yelling, gesticulating a great deal, tapping his foot and moving around the Indians" (Leite 1965, 156).

Being quite sure about the real effectiveness of the actio, the missionaries put it to good use, not only when they spoke in Tupi but also when they spoke through interpreters. Thus when Fr. Nóbrega engaged in a debate with a sorcerer who considered himself to be a god, "an interpreter whom I held in high esteem, said everything I told him to say; he said it aloud and exhibiting the [same] signs of feeling which I was showing him" (Nóbrega 1988, 95).

Conclusion: The Same Rhetorical Project Come True

Whereas the Jesuit preachers in Asia resorted to the principles of narratio and argumentatio, Fr. João Navarro, in Brazil, realized the power of amplificatio in moving the affections. Thus Navarro confirmed the leading role traditionally ascribed to the actio in the process of persuasion; that is, he employed an actio imitated from the "alterity" of the customs of his new audience, instead of the conventional actio performed in the pulpit and copied from European hieratic customs or from the teachings of Cicero and Ouintilian.

Unlike Bishop Pedro Fernandes Sardinha, Fr. José de Anchieta did not despair of the Indians' abilities. Indeed, Anchieta was so skilled at assimilating local choreographies and providing them with a Christian meaning that he would even interpret them symbolically: in his view, the body's movements in the Indians' dancing were like "the psalterium of the body" or the "strings of the chest" (Anchieta 2000). Along the same lines, he saw dances representing combat as expressing man's innermost spiritual struggle.

In this way, the music, the songs, and the choreographies were a kind of discourse in their own right. Both Anchieta's theatrical plays, insofar as they wove together music and word, and Navarro's preaching in the Indian manner constituted one and the same rhetorical project come true—the very same project that also underlay the apologetic sermons performed by the missionaries in Asia in their debates with the Brahmans and the bonzes. Whereas the latter were more directed to reason and the intellect, with a predominance of symbolic hermeneutics and philosophical argumentation to them, the former stressed the language of the senses and affections. And all this was in keeping with the Aristotelian and Thomist gnoseology, according to which "Nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu." It is on the basis of data provided by the senses that man first knows.

The anthropological foundations of classical rhetoric, in which missionary preachers were schooled, were actually unitary as they envisaged a continuity between soul and body, the cognitive dimension and the sensitive one. This unity was expressed in the interaction between the rational and the emotional, intellect and passion—that is, the very faculties involved in persuasion.

Furthermore, it was the unitary anthropology underpinning classical rhetoric, together with the historical experience of the European missionary among the Gentiles, that enabled Father Nóbrega to express universal meaning of the humane in his Dialogue on the Conversion of the Gentiles. Challenged by the hard truth that no rhetoric made up of reasons and speeches was good enough to convert the Indians and their rough understanding into the Christian faith, Nóbrega dares to respond that "all men are of one and the same nature ... all of them can know God; and the Pope's soul is equal to the soul of the slave, Papana" (Nóbrega 1998, 233-37).

The examples of Manuel da Nóbrega, João Navarro, José de Anchieta, and Francis Xavier show the transcultural nature of the rhetorical doctrine in which overseas missionaries had been schooled.

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