

Opening the Door

The Jesuit, Missionary Contribution to Dialogue

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Abstract

The Jesuit contribution to the religious and cultural dialogue between Europe and Asia in the 16th to the 18th centuries was as remarkable an achievement as it was a precarious one. Certainly, it was not without its ambiguities and tensions, but it did open the door to an indigenous and enculturated Christianity that surely had the promise of a deep and enriching encounter between East and West.

The venture was legitimised by the Jesuits largely in terms of a religious discourse, which tried to sift the essentials from the accidentals and present their teaching in the local religious forms and cultural idiom. But this was eventually over-ridden by the ecclesiastical conflicts within and without the Church, the exigencies and limitations of a declining colonial power, the resistance of the local elites supporting the status quo. Hence it is the political discourse that implicitly subsumed the more explicit religious one, and closed the door, which the Jesuits had opened with so much dedication and sacrifice.

Today the door is open once again, and the religious context has dramatically changed with Vatican II, as the political one has in a post-imperialist world. A new dialogue with a new focus is called for today, for the actors in the drama and the stage setting has changed. But there is still something to be learnt from Robert de Nobili and the Madurai mission.