

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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Africa and South America (1500-1600)

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Rodolfo Acquaviva

DATE OF BIRTH 2 October 1550
PLACE OF BIRTH Atri, Italy
DATE OF DEATH 25 July 1583
PLACE OF DEATH Cuncolim, Goa, India

BIOGRAPHY

The Italian Jesuit Rodolfo Acquaviva spent three years at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, and wrote a series of letters from Akbar's capital, Fatehpur Sikri, describing his experiences in religious engagement with Muslims. His letters record one of the most significant early Christian-Muslim religious encounters, in which Europeans peacefully entered and lived in a Muslim context.

Rodolfo's uncle, Claudio Acquaviva, had joined the Jesuits in 1567, and later headed the Society between 1581 and 1615. Rodolfo seems to have been influenced by his uncle's choice: he became a novice on 2 April 1568, and pursued studies in Rome. After this, he was chosen for the India mission. He was ordained priest in 1577, and sailed for India from Lisbon in 1578.

On arrival in Goa, Rodolfo first taught philosophy at St Paul's College. Soon after, however, he was chosen for the mission to the court of the Emperor Akbar, which was sent at Akbar's request, in 1579. The embassy from Akbar had arrived in Goa in September 1579 (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 54) with a letter from Akbar to the rulers in Goa, which said, '... I am sending Abdullah, my ambassador, and Dominic Perez with the request that you will send me two learned Fathers and the books of the Law, especially the Gospel, that I may know the Law and its excellence...' (Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, p. 6)

The Jesuit Provincial in Goa, Rui Vincente, chose two other priests along with Rodolfo for the mission, the Persian-born Francis Henriques, a convert from Islam, and Antony Monserrate. After a journey of more than three months, they arrived in Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, on 28 February 1580. Rodolfo remained in Fatehpur Sikri for the next three years.

Akbar received the Jesuits with warmth and affection, and got them involved immediately in the inter-religious discussions already taking

place. The Jesuits presented Akbar with the seven-volume Royal Polyglot Bible, printed for King Philip II by Christophe Plantijn at Antwerp, 1569-72. This Bible became the object of Akbar's sympathetic personal attention.

During the course of his stay, Rodolfo wrote a series of letters about the Jesuits' experiences in their interactions with Akbar and with Muslim scholars. In a number of the letters, he wrote that he might well die a martyr among the Muslims, because his Christian teaching and his person were so despised by the general population. However, Akbar provided him with special protection as long as he was in the Mughal dominions.

Francis Henriques left Fatehpur Sikri in 1581, and Antony Monserrate returned to Goa in 1582, but Rodolfo stayed on, still hopeful that Akbar might yet convert to Christianity (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 87). At that very time, however, Akbar, having returned victorious from battle in the north-west, was concentrating instead on creating his own eclectic religion, known as *Dīn-i-ilāhi*.

When Akbar agreed to Rodolfo's return to Goa on 24 February 1583, he wrote to the Father Provincial in Goa to request that Rodolfo be sent back with some other fathers. After returning to Goa, however, Rodolfo led a mission to a community of Hindu Kshatriyas in Salsette, to the south of Goa. The Hindus revolted, and Rodolfo and four other Jesuits were killed in the violence. He and his companions were beatified by Pope Leo XIII in 1893.

Monserrate later wrote that Akbar was deeply moved at the news of Rodolfo's death, and exclaimed in his grief: 'Alas, Father! Did I not tell you not to go away? But you would not listen to me' (Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, pp. 123-4).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

P. Daniello Bartoli, *Missione al Gran Mogor del padre Ridolfo Aquaviva della compagnia di Giesu. Sua vita e morte, e d'altri quattro compagni uccisi in odio della fede in Salsete di Goa*, Rome, 1714

Secondary

M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, 'Frank disputations. Catholics and Muslims in the court of Jahangir (1608-11)', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46 (2009) 457-511

- H. Didier, 'Muslim heterodoxy, Persian *murtaddun* and Jesuit missionaries at the court of King Akbar (1580-1605)', *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008) 898-939
- E.R. Hambye, 'The First Jesuit mission to Emperor Akbar', in C.W. Troll (ed.), *Islam in India. Studies and Commentaries*, New Delhi, 1982, 3-13
- J. Correia-Afonso, *Letters from the Mughal court. The first Jesuit mission to Akbar, 1580-1583*, Bombay, 1980
- E. MacLagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul*, London, 1932
- V. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul*, Oxford, 1926
- P. du Jarric, *Akbar and the Jesuits. An account of the Jesuit missions to the court of Akbar*, London, 1926
- F. Goldie, *The first Christian mission to the Great Mogul*, Dublin, 1897

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Nouveaux avis de l'estat du Christianisme, 'Fresh information about the condition of Christianity'

DATE 1582

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

DESCRIPTION

Nouveaux avis de l'estat du Christianisme (in full *Nouveaux avis de l'estat du Christianisme es pay et royaumes des Indes Orientales et Japon, envoyés au R.P. general de la Compagnie du Nom de Jesus*), a collection of writings published in Paris in 1582, contains passages from the letters of Rodolfo Acquaviva and his companion Jesuits in the first mission sent to the Mughal court. The book is a collection of various materials from the time, and the letters of Acquaviva and his fellow Jesuits at the court of Akbar are described on the first 8 pages (numbered pp. 1-4 in the 1582 edition), titled, 'Aucuns pointz tirez des letters du P. Rodolphe Aquaviva, & des autres Peres qui sont avec luy en la mission faite au Roy de Mogor'.

Other materials in the short book are from the *Annales* of Goa, October 1580, and from letters from Duarte Beiton (January 1581 from Cochin) and Alessandro Valignano (December 1579 from Japan).

The passages in the 'Aucuns pointz' do not indicate author or date. However, a number of the passages are quoted from Rodolfo's early letters from Fatehpur Sikri. Akbar's initial invitation to the priests to come to the Mughal court is described, along with Akbar's friendly reception of the priests and the religious debates into which Akbar introduced them.

Akbar offered the priests money, but the priests refused the gift, and he admired their way of life, which he found different from that of the Muslim leaders. The emperor visited the Jesuits' quarters and showed interest in the religious paintings they had brought with them. The Jesuits wrote that Akbar permitted those who wished to become Christians to do so. The Jesuits encouraged Akbar to show Christian virtues and to establish hospitals.

One of the more striking incidents described in these passages is the challenge by a Muslim leader to a trial by fire. The Muslim proposed that Rodolfo enter the flames with his Gospel in his hand and that the Muslim do the same with the Qur'an, in order to determine which scripture was true. Akbar later urged Rodolfo to accept the challenge, confiding that he did not like the Muslim and would require him to enter the flames first, then stop the contest immediately after. Rodolfo, however, refused to participate (*Nouveaux advis*, pp. 4-5).

'Among all the mysteries of our faith,' wrote the Jesuits, there were two with which Akbar had a lot of difficulty: the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Jesuits also disputed with the Muslim leaders about the death of Jesus and his identity as the Son of God.

The passages quoted from their letters also discuss the uncertainty of Akbar's conversion. On the one hand, the emperor considered Islam false, seemed inclined to reason freely, and showed love for Jesus and the Jesuits, even entrusting his sons to them for study. On the other, the Jesuits noted Akbar's curious and inconstant nature, and his dedication to pleasures, drink and women ('of which he maintains a great multitude in his house') (*Nouveaux advis*, p. 8).

SIGNIFICANCE

The comments about the significance of the 'Letters written during the first mission to Akbar's court' also apply to this short collection of excerpts from the letters of Rodolfo and his Jesuit colleagues.

Related to the *Nouveaux advis de l'estat du Christianisme* in particular, however, these passages from the Fatehpur Sikri letters were published in Europe very soon after the start of the mission to Akbar, in fact while Rodolfo was still in Fatehpur Sikri with the emperor. This meant that a wide readership was able to 'participate' in the experiences of the Jesuits, both in religious debate and in cultural exchange. This book was a popular source of information about Muslim faith from an authentic inter-religious encounter that was quite separate from the traditional medieval political hostilities between Islam and Christendom.

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

Nouveaux avis de l'estat du Christianisme es pay et royaumes des Indes Orientales et Japon, Envoyés au R.P. general de la Compagnie du Nom de Jesus, Paris, 1582, <http://shinku.nichibun.ac.jp/kichosho/new/books/35/suema000000074w.html>

STUDIES

Didier, 'Muslim heterodoxy, Persian *murtaddun* and Jesuit missionaries'
Hambye, 'The First Jesuit mission to Emperor Akbar'

MacLagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul*

Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul*

Du Jarric, *Akbar and the Jesuits*

Letters written during the first mission to Akbar's court

DATE 1580-3

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Portuguese

DESCRIPTION

The letters written by Rodolfo Acquaviva from the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in Fatehpur Sikri, in the years 1580 to 1583, record the experiences of three Jesuits among Muslims at the heart of Mughal rule. Just before setting out on the journey from Goa to Fatehpur Sikri, Rodolfo wrote to his uncle Claudio on 17 November 1579 that he was already anticipating 'a chance of suffering something for Christ our Lord' (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 58). Around the same time, he wrote to Laurence Petri of the 'joy and consolation' he felt in the mission, 'all that a Religious of the Society can desire' (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 80).

Similarly, in one of his first letters from Fatehpur Sikri, Rodolfo wrote to the General of the Jesuits that he had joy at the prospect of martyrdom. In the concluding paragraph of the 18 July 1580 letter, he wrote, 'For "we have confessed and have not denied, we have confessed" that Muḥammad is not the prophet of God, and we have not denied that Christ is the Son of God' (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 75).

The conversations and disputations with Akbar and the Muslim representatives at the court often concerned matters of basic religious loyalty. Later, in 1580, Rodolfo wrote of his displeasure at hearing so frequently the name of Islam's messenger, and his determination to speak

only of Jesus as the Son of God. 'In a word, Muḥammad is everything here, Antichrist reigns,' he wrote to Father Nuñez Rodriguez, Rector at Goa (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 78), elsewhere commenting that many Muslims in Fatehpur Sikri already desired the death of the Jesuits, and that only the protection of Akbar prevented it.

In spite of discouragements and danger, the letters show that Rodolfo remained optimistic as late as 15 April 1582, when he wrote to his uncle Claudio, now head of the Jesuits. Among five reasons why Rodolfo felt he should stay on in Fatehpur Sikri, the first was the 'love and familiarity' of Akbar toward the Jesuits. Another fascinating reason was that 'where we are is the true and real India'. If the Jesuits could gain a footing at Fatehpur Sikri, he thought, they would have access to many parts of Asia, and could work for the conversion of the Indian mainland (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 87).

Rodolfo's letter of 27 September 1582, toward the end of his stay in Fatehpur Sikri, reports in a chatty tone on the events at court. He wrote to Rui Vincente, the Provincial at Goa, about conversations with a Sufi from Bengal, friendly relations with Akbar at a Portuguese wedding, and the syncretistic religious 'novelties' that Akbar was introducing into the court.

Rodolfo wrote that Akbar did not want to give him permission to return to Goa. Rodolfo wanted to meet with the Provincial to discuss the mission because, he wrote, 'I have many things to communicate to you about this mission, which I have discovered since I learnt the language, and I am discovering more every day.' Rodolfo also proposed new seminaries in Goa, with teaching in Persian for Muslims and in Hindustani for Hindus, since Akbar had declared that every person might follow the religion that each preferred (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, pp. 102-3).

SIGNIFICANCE

The letters communicate an authentic attempt by European Christians to convince Akbar of the truth of Christianity and their hope that Akbar himself would become a Christian. 'That which I wished for I have been able to do,' wrote Rodolfo on 10 December 1580, 'to bear witness before the kings and rulers of this world to the name of Jesus Christ' (Goldie, *First Christian mission*, p. 76). Rodolfo connected this with his hope for a martyr's death.

Akbar's initial invitation came, according to the sources, because in 1576 two Jesuits in Bengal, Antony Vaz and Peter Dias, had rebuked some

Portuguese merchants there who had not paid their taxes to the Mughal treasury (Hambye, 'First Jesuit mission', p. 4). The mission was not related to political relations between the Mughals and the Portuguese, but rather to friendly intercultural relationships and religious discussion.

The eclectic religious views of Akbar had two sides for Rodolfo. It meant Akbar's openness and curiosity about Christian scriptures and views and his freedom to show such affection and protection towards the Jesuits, but, on the other hand, Akbar's eclecticism meant that in the end he would not commit to Christianity as the Jesuits hoped. Akbar was at that very time developing his own syncretistic religion, *Dīn-i-ilāhi*.

Though political force went together with missionary activity in many of the incursions of the Portuguese into South Asia in the 16th century, the letters of Acquaviva give no sense that Portuguese military power would back the efforts of the Jesuits at Fatehpur Sikri. In fact, the Jesuits were deep in the territory of a confident Mughal Empire, and Rodolfo was quite at the mercy of Akbar as far as his departure from the capital was concerned.

The first Jesuit mission to Akbar's court created the possibility of a pattern of normal relationships between scholars of different religious convictions: several other missions of Jesuit missionaries were well received by the Mughal court, in 1591 in Lahore, in 1595 (Jerome Xavier) in Lahore, and later, during the reign of Jahangir (1608-11).

The portrait of Akbar in these letters is of a Muslim monarch who showed tolerance that was in a sense ahead of his time for people of different religions to live together in peace and even to debate together. Though sometimes angered by the Jesuits' speeches, Akbar never harmed them for this reason, nor did he turn to violence, even on hearing the Jesuits' 'frank' judgments on the messenger of Islam.

MANUSCRIPTS

MS London, BL – Add. (Marsden) 9854, fols. 1-3 (Letter of 27 September 1582, from Rodolfo Acquaviva in Fatehpur Sikri to Ruy Vincente, Provincial at Goa)

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

Goldie, *The first Christian mission to the Great Mogul*

Correia-Afonso, *Letters from the Mughal court*

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Didier, 'Muslim heterodoxy, Persian *murtaddun* and Jesuit missionaries'

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Du Jarric, *Akbar and the Jesuits*

Gordon Nickel