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Christianity and Culture: The Catholic Mission in Pre-Modern Japan

Simon Clay

〈Abstract〉

This is a transcript of a lecture that I gave on 27th January, 2002, as part of a course on Christianity and Culture hosted by St. Alban's Anglican / Episcopal Church, Tokyo. It represents a preliminary study leading to further research on the Catholic Mission in 16th and 17th century Japan, with particular emphasis on the role of Japanese converts to Christianity at that time.

〈要 約〉

本稿は東京にある聖オルバン・アングリカン／エписコパル教会においてシリーズで行われた公開講座「キリスト教と文化」の講座の一つとして、2002年1月27日に行った講演をもとに加筆、修正したものである。この講演で論じたことは16世紀及び17世紀の日本におけるカトリック伝導研究の入り口部分であり、今後はこの研究を更に進めて特に当時の日本人のキリスト教改宗者の果たした役割について研究を深めたい。

As I begin my lecture this afternoon, I would like to ask the non-Japanese here to consider for a moment their lives in Japan. Please think about how much you have adapted to life here. Have you had difficulties adapting to aspects of Japanese culture? To Japanese food, for example? If you are Christian, please think particularly about what it has meant to you to be a Christian in Japan.

I would like the Japanese present here today to think for a moment about your encounters with western people and, in particular, western ideas about religion. Please consider how these might differ from ideas commonly held in Japan. If you are Christian, please think about how you became a Christian and what your faith means to you, here in Japan, in 2002.

Now, I want you to travel with me back in time to the year 1551. In England the Tudors have been on the throne for sixty years, although the great Elizabethan Age has yet to begin. Henry VIII has been dead for only four years and his son, Edward VI, is shakily protecting the Protestant faith before the reign of his Catholic elder sister, “Bloody” Mary.

In Japan, it is the Muromachi Period. There is no central rule by either Emperor or Shogun, and the country is divided into sixty-six fiefdoms, whose rulers seem to be almost constantly at war. It is the great age of the warrior, the sword-wielding samurai with whom we are familiar from film and T.V., and who is now helped in his military endeavours by the use of firearms, which arrived in Japan with the first Portuguese travellers just less than ten years ago. In a place called Kiyosu, a promising seventeen year-old named Oda Nobunaga is rising through the ranks and taking control of his faction. The Japanese are not the isolated race they are later to become, but are known throughout East Asia as traders and as pirates. It is the period of refinement in Noh drama and the tea ceremony.

In Kyushu, there are about a thousand native Christians. There are a number of small schools, and a hospital has been established to treat sufferers of leprosy; the first of its kind in Japan providing care for this previously reviled disease.

All this is the achievement of a Spanish missionary called Francis Xavier. He left Japan in November this year having arrived two years before from Malacca in the company of a Japanese convert known as Yajiro. Yajiro, a low-ranking samurai, had left Japan on a Portuguese ship a few years earlier to escape a charge of manslaughter. Arriving eventually in the Portuguese settlement of Goa, he converted to Christianity and rapidly learned Portuguese. Yajiro had met Xavier at the end of 1547 and had convinced him of the possibility of many conversions in Japan.

When Yajiro travelled with Xavier to Japan in 1549, he acted as his interpreter, although as such he was sometimes more of a hindrance than a help. Not a particularly highly educated man, who could reportedly read only kana and simple kanji, and with only a sketchy knowledge of Buddhism, Yajiro translated the fundamental word “God” as “*Dainichi*”, the supreme deity of the Shingon Sect. It was to Xavier’s horror that, some time into his mission, he realised that the Japanese had taken him for another Buddhist preacher. This unfortunate mistake haunted the missionaries to Japan from the early years, and thereafter they tended to rely on Japanese versions of western terms (the word most often used for “God” being a Japanese version of the Latin *Deus*, for example).

In spite of misunderstandings however, Xavier attracted many to listen to his preaching. He would gather crowds (most often including many children) by walking through the streets ringing a bell. He would then preach to his assembled congregation using signs and symbols, and prayers set to music, which he would help them to memorise. He evidently had great personal charm, and many were impressed by his gentleness and charity.

After a short time, Xavier left his thousand or so converts holding fast to a faith that, although we might not recognise it as modern Christianity, was perhaps not dissimilar to Christianity as practised by many in contemporary Europe. Prayers were remembered and repeated, and there was belief in the healing power of relics left behind by the missionary. A purse containing pieces of paper inscribed with Xavier's handwriting and given to a Christian woman in Kagoshima, for example, was said to heal all those who touched it.

Xavier himself seems to have been captivated by Japan and wrote enthusiastically: "It seems to me we will never find among heathens another race equal to the Japanese. They are a people of very good manners, good in general and not malicious ... they are small eaters (albeit somewhat heavy drinkers [!]). ... They are people of very good will, ... very desirous of knowledge; they are very fond of hearing about things of God." ¹⁾ Missionary reinforcements began to arrive in Japan from the following year.

Let me now take you forward in time, jumping forty years to the year 1591. Queen Elizabeth I is now on the English throne. The first recorded London performance of a Shakespeare play took place just last year, and England is settling down for a golden age of sonnets.

Japan has changed considerably. The unification of the country, under which the fiefdoms and their rulers are controlled by a central power, had been started by Oda Nobunaga and was completed this year by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. He is establishing his rule with preparations for an invasion of Korea. The distinction between samurai warrior and commoner is becoming clearer, with little or no movement now between the two classes. The great age of the warrior continues and aspects of their culture, such as Noh drama, continue to flourish, although it's a bad year for the tea ceremony. The so-called "Father of Tea", Sen no Rikyu has been ordered by Hideyoshi to commit suicide. (Incidentally, some of his family and many of his disciples were Christian converts, although there is no evidence to suggest that he himself was, and Christianity certainly had little or nothing to do with his death.)

The number of Christian converts in Japan has risen to over two hundred thousand. The first Jesuit Bishop of Japan will be appointed next year. There are at least one hundred and eighty churches under Jesuit control, including a fine church in Kyoto, the *Nanbanji* ("Temple of the Southern Barbarians"). The *Nanbanji* appears in several contemporary works of art showing famous sights of the Imperial Capital. It is an impressive Japanese-style building with a three-story central tower and a Japanese garden and has, by 1591, become something of a Kyoto landmark (although, for reasons that I will touch on in a moment, services have for the time being been moved elsewhere).

There is a Jesuit seminary in Kyushu, which was established as a result of combining three earlier schools, and in the same area, a western printing press. There is a growing output of books and pamphlets in Latin, Portuguese and Japanese. This year's bestseller is a useful book called *Doctriina Kirishitan*, which has been

published in Japanese (although as yet only in *romaji*) and answers questions frequently asked by Japanese converts.

In 1591, things are looking good for Christianity in Japan, but this is not to say that it has all been plain sailing. Four years ago, in 1587, Hideyoshi suddenly turned against the missionaries, accusing them of forcing people to convert, of destroying temples and of colluding in a Portuguese trade of Japanese slaves. The missionaries were ordered to leave the country.

Few did, however, and the edict was never enforced. Although the missionaries did take a lower profile (for example, moving out of the great church in Kyoto), the growth of Christianity was allowed to gather momentum, and in fact Hideyoshi continued to promote some of his vassals, even after they had converted to Christianity.

Last year, in 1590, a group of Japanese young men returned from a trip to Europe. On the initiative of the Jesuit Visitor Alessandro Valignano (the most senior missionary before the arrival of the Bishop), four boys had been chosen to represent Japanese warlords on an ambassadorial tour of Europe. Travelling via Goa to Lisbon, they crossed Spain and were presented to Philip II in Madrid before eventually making their way to Rome.

Imagine the scene on 23rd March, 1585. Rome is the splendid capital of the Catholic Reformation. The great dome of St. Peter's has not been long completed, and the city's churches continue to be adorned with great works of art. Amidst cheering crowds, four young Japanese men in full kimono clatter through the streets on horseback. Said to be ambassadors of Japanese "kings", they are likened to the Magi. Which was part of the point. Valignano wanted to demonstrate the Church of Rome had gentile converts from the very ends of the earth (this would be one in the eye for the Protestants). He also wanted to impress the Japanese ambassadors themselves, believing that their stories of the beauty of Christian cities and the might of Christian princes would persuade many of the Japanese warlords to convert. The boys were carefully chaperoned and not allowed to see anything that might give less than a good impression of Europe. (This was so successful that some of the boys asked if they might stay in Rome and study for ordination – their request was refused).

Although Hideyoshi's prohibition of missionary activity had been made during their time away from Japan, the young ambassadors were welcomed back with Valignano (who returned after an absence from Japan not as Jesuit Visitor, however, but as Ambassador of the Portuguese Viceroy of India). Not only had Hideyoshi taken no action against the Christians (for one thing he was busy preparing to invade Korea) he was becoming fond of dressing up in western clothes and sometimes even carried a rosary. In fact, western dress was quite the thing, and young dandies would walk the streets of Kyoto dressed in Portuguese clothes quoting the Lord's Prayer for luck. This time, the boys ride through Kyoto in western dress. The meeting with Hideyoshi goes well. They play western instruments and sing to him and Hideyoshi is very pleased.

Now a third year. 1623. The Mayflower sailed three years ago, and we can assume that the Pilgrim Fathers are getting on with their busy task of creating America. In England James I is on the throne, slobbering and fiddling with his codpiece and writing tracts against witchcraft and tobacco.

In Japan, the long period of internal peace known as the Edo, or Tokugawa, Period has begun. The separate fiefdoms still exist, but they are firmly under Tokugawa rule. Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and now the Tokugawa shoguns have been systematically eliminating all opposition to unification. The country is not yet completely closed to the outside world, although this isn't far off.

And what about the situation for Christianity? Last year there were one hundred and thirty two martyrdoms (thirteen were Europeans). This year, seventy-six Japanese and two European Christians were put to death on the road from Tokyo to Yokohama. Later, more will be killed around what is now Shiba Koen.

This is a description of the martyrdom of priests and other Christians that took place this year. "As soon as the fire was kindled, these brave crusaders of Christ greeted one another and shouted mutual encouragement ... as the fire flared up and began to enwrap them ... [they] ... could be seen through the flames braving the onslaught of the blaze with surprising valour. Fr. Jerome could be seen first turning towards the city [that is, Tokyo] praying for it briefly, then turning to where the flames, fanned by the wind, attacked him most fiercely, partly to show that he did not fear it, partly to say some last words to the folk who stood there in great numbers ... He remained the same, ever erect and exhorting the crowds ... until he succumbed to the might of the fire." ²⁾ There are bloodier descriptions, but I will spare you.

Christianity had finally been outlawed and all missionaries made to leave in 1614. I will not go too deeply into the reasons now, but nothing was allowed to stand out in the strictly ordered society that the Tokugawa shoguns were creating. The Jesuits had at first been looked upon kindly because they had assisted in the valuable trade with Portuguese ships visiting from Macao. This, however, was now much less important. There were other linguists who could help, and besides, there was now trade opening up with the British and the Dutch. These Protestant Europeans were eager to denounce the Catholic missionaries, and fuelled suspicions already held by the Japanese that the missionaries were in Japan to prepare the way for invasion by a European king. That they had boasted of the might of the King of Spain is often given as a reason for the imprisonment and then the crucifixion of a group of Spanish Friars in 1597 – the first martyrdoms in Japan.

In spite of this, however, the situation prior to 1614 had been encouraging. Figures vary, but in 1612 there were said to be at least a quarter of a million converts. Prior to the expulsion of the missionaries there had been fifty-eight young men at the seminary at Kyushu studying Japanese, Latin and Music, and two hundred and fifty native catechists scattered around the country. At last there were Japanese priests, the first having been ordained in 1601. By 1614, there were fourteen Japanese priests in Japan (and others in Macao); nine of these were Jesuit priests and the rest secular priests. The western printing press had produced so much material, that the amount burned in the streets of Nagasaki in 1626 is described as a "mountain".

After 1614, some priests have stayed on in hiding and others come in secret. Many travel away from the known Christian areas in Kyushu and stay hidden for many years in the north of Japan – one western missionary even makes it as far as Hokkaido at this time. When they are discovered, it is often not until the 1630s, or even later.

In our year, 1623 however, several have been apprehended and are being kept in terribly overcrowded, stinking, starving conditions. Those Christians who won't renounce their faith are subjected to dreadful

tortures, one of the most common being “the pit”, where prisoners are kept suspended upside down over a pit filled with excrement and other filth, a shallow cut in the foreheads to let the blood run slowly. No one survives this torture for long and many apostatise (including, to the delight of the authorities, one very senior European Jesuit). Many more however, don't. Some are even converted at the martyrdoms knowing what might be in store. Of course, the vast majority of the martyrs are Japanese; contemporary writings reserve praise particularly for the great strength of the women prisoners, in particularly some Korean women who are martyred alongside the Japanese.

In spite of the scenes of great bravery, however, Japan's “Christian Century” is slowly coming to an end, less than ninety years since it began. The last gasp is the Shimabara Rebellion beginning in 1637 when peasants in Kyushu take up arms against their local leader. Although the rebellion is not totally the responsibility of Christians, it is seen as a Christian rebellion and is brutally put down. The Tokugawa shoguns continue to exert their control by methods such as compulsory registration with a Buddhist temple for all citizens, large financial rewards for those giving information leading to the capture of Christians (especially missionaries) and a test of loyalty known as the *fumie* where suspected Christians are made to stamp their foot on a holy image, such as a picture of the Virgin Mary. Failure to do so meant loyalty to the Christian God over loyalty to their Japanese lord, to their ancestors and to their community, resulting in exile or death.

Just before I return to Christianity in Japan in the sixteenth century, let's look at one more year. The year is 1865. After a long period of seclusion, Japan is opening up again to the west. A newly arrived French missionary in Kyushu is approached by a group of local people. With deep gravity they tell him, “Our heart is the same as yours”. Then they ask, “Where is your statue of Maria-sama?” They are able to recite the Lord's Prayer and other prayers in Japanese. Against all the odds, Christianity has, in a Japanese form hidden from sight, survived.

You will have gathered, of course, that when I talk of Christianity as introduced into Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I am talking about Catholic or Counter Reformation Catholicism. Also, up until the early 1590s, the only missionaries in Japan were Jesuits. Franciscan friars began to arrive in the 1590s, followed in small numbers by other orders, but it wasn't until 1608 that the Pope formally gave permission for any order to enter the field.

What makes this period particularly exciting for me is the singular sense of equality that exists in the relationship between the Japanese and the Europeans. From ancient times, the Japanese had looked up to China as the most superior culture in the world. In fact, one of the questions that the Japanese asked the first missionaries was that, if Christianity was so great, why hadn't the Chinese heard of it? (This general sense of awe didn't prevent Japanese pirates from scaring the hell out of Chinese coastal regions, or Hideyoshi from considering an invasion of China however). Japanese relations with other neighbouring countries were, and still are complicated, but very rarely marked with a strong sense of equality. In the Meiji period the West tended to have a rather patronising view of the Japanese and even if the Japanese didn't look up in awe to the

West, they certainly saw the need to learn from what seemed at the time a superior culture. It was a similar situation, in some ways, after the Pacific War.

In our period however, the European visitors, and in particular the missionaries, treated the Japanese on much more of an equal footing than was the case in other parts of the world. Jesuit Visitor Valignano writes of the Japanese in the early 1580s: "The people are all white, and very cultivated, and even the common people and the peasants are well brought up and marvellously polite amongst themselves ... in this they outdo not only other peoples of the East, but us Europeans ..." ³⁾

This from a high-born and proud Italian aristocrat who was by no means free of racial prejudice. He also wrote that the Africans were of low intelligence, lacked culture and were incapable of understanding Christianity. The Indians, he thought to be of low intelligence and born to serve, rather than command. He goes on to write of the Japanese, "We cannot compel them to do anything that they do not wish to do, other than by pure persuasion and force of argument; they will not suffer being slapped or beaten, not imprisonment, not any other similar methods commonly used with Asiatic Christians ... they will not brook ... even an impolite word." ⁴⁾ From this account, one shudders to think what relations were like with other Asiatic Christians!

The Jesuits went to great lengths to adapt themselves to Japan, particularly after the 1580s and particularly through the efforts of Valignano and another Italian, Organtino. Their approach was one that was very rarely, if ever, seen amongst missionaries in the nineteenth century, although of course they had a Biblical precedent for this. St. Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law" (1 Corinthians 9 : 20).

The Jesuits saw that the Buddhist clergy were treated with respect and decided that they should be treated at a similar level in Japanese society. For some of the time they wore similar kimono as those worn by the Buddhists. They studied the details of Japanese etiquette, including the intricacies of rules governing the giving and receiving of gifts. They laid great emphasis on the necessity to hide emotion, recognising that the Japanese rarely showed open signs of either great grief or joy.

As I mentioned earlier, this was the period of the tea ceremony and the Jesuits constructed tea ceremony rooms in their residences so that they could properly entertain their guests. There are theories that the Catholic Mass influenced the rituals of the tea ceremony, and whether or not this was in fact the case, there were tea bowls decorated with Christian symbols and at least one painted screen showing tea being served in one room of a Christian church.

The Jesuits lived in Japanese rooms and ate Japanese food (in contrast to many later European visitors to Japan). Valignano interestingly commends the Japanese for their sparing diet, and remarks that the European habit of over-eating often led to illness or early death. The missionaries were allowed to eat meat, but only very sparingly. As a rule, they were not allowed to keep pigs or goats, nor to slaughter cows. They were certainly not allowed to tan hides into leather, as this was seen in Japan as work for only the lowest of the low. They were expected to keep a higher level of cleanliness than was usual in Europe at the time. Their clothes and kitchens were kept scrupulously clean, although it appears that they were never as keen on taking

baths as their Japanese neighbours.

Some effort was made to adapt Christianity to Japan. Converts were generally forbidden visits to temples and shrines and so missed out on the important New Year celebrations. To make up for this, New Year was briefly replaced for Christians by the new festival of “Santa Maria of Protection” when there were processions and celebrations in honour of the Virgin, now seen as special protector of all Japan. Some more recent church laws were relaxed, such as the one that prevented Christians from marrying pagans. Most interestingly, in the Jesuits’ Regulations of 1612, it was stated that the Gospel should only be preached in such a way that European customs were not introduced with it.

The Japanese had problems with Christian doctrine as taught by the missionaries nevertheless. One sticking point for many was the idea of fidelity to one wife. Ideas about divorce and remarriage also caused the samurai problems. At the time, it is said that if a warlord moved to a new fiefdom, his samurai vassals would follow, leaving their wives behind them. The incoming samurai would then take on the wives who had been left behind – not a situation compatible with the teachings of the Europeans.

There was also the problem that Christianity offered salvation only to the living and not to the dead. Conversion therefore meant abandoning the ancestors – something unthinkable in Japan where the ancestors were enshrined as gods and protectors of the living. This problem, which was also to hinder the work of Christian missionaries in future centuries, was one for which the Jesuits could offer no solution. Interestingly, however, during the long years that Christianity was kept in secret by the *kakure* Christians “ancestral elements”⁵⁾ were incorporated into the faith.

As I mentioned earlier, the Jesuits knew that the Buddhist clergy were treated with respect and in order to command a similar level of respect, based their dress and behaviour on those of priests, particularly of the Rinzai sect. Many Jesuits studied Buddhism in some detail and learned a considerable amount about its teachings. A Japanese-Portuguese dictionary of 1604 contained many Buddhist words. Knowledge of Buddhist teaching and the ability to discuss it in Japanese was certainly necessary in order to debate with Buddhist priests as well as to disprove Buddhist teachings to the laity. Also, as the missionaries recognised, and as Xavier had found to his cost, the Christian teachings could be easily mistaken for another form of Buddhism. Of course, the missionaries saw Buddhism as the work of the devil. It was considered far more dangerous than Shinto as it was more organised and was preached to the masses. The missionaries were also shocked and disgusted by the prevalence of homosexuality amongst the Buddhist clergy.

Having said this, many of the Jesuits, including Xavier, had cordial relations with Buddhist priests and many had the linguistic ability to enter into debate with Buddhist philosophers and teachers. Although the Jesuits had to rely heavily on Japanese interpreters in their work there were some who had excellent Japanese language skills. One, Rodrigues, also known as the “Interpreter” was well known as translator for Nobunaga and Hideyoshi and became something of a public figure. Another, Navarro, an Italian martyred in 1622, wrote and published several books in Japanese.

While the Jesuits attempted to learn about Japanese language, religion and culture and at the same time tried to avoid passing on European culture, they did see the value of art and music in helping to put across their message. Music was taught in the Jesuit schools from early on, and later painting was also part of the

curriculum. One Italian teacher of painting, Giovanni Nicolo taught painting at the Kyushu seminary for 31 years from the 1580s.

It must be remembered however, that the Jesuits weren't out to convert Buddhist priests with clever rhetoric or the odd peasant with impressive music and art. In this period in Japan, the word of the local warlord was law. If the local feudal lord converted then it often meant that all his vassals from the peasantry up would also be forced to convert. The Jesuits therefore put a great deal of effort into converting the upper classes (until in later years their loyalty to Japan's new rulers made this impossible, after which the Jesuits had to concentrate their efforts on converts lower down the social scale). In spite of the Jesuits' financial problems, the necessary exchange of expensive gifts took place, and as we've seen, the Jesuits built rooms for the tea ceremony into their residences so that local dignitaries could be properly entertained. The upper classes reviled leprosy and so the hospital for lepers, which had been established early on in Kyushu was closed, one missionary having commented that it was "both a most edifying work of mercy and a great obstacle to the spread of Christianity." 6)

One does suspect how sincere the conversions were – especially if the lower orders were "forced" to convert by their overlords who may have only converted themselves in order to attract lucrative Portuguese trade. However, the conversion of a local lord often in fact meant that the missionaries were given rights to preach, open churches and give alms so continuing the process of conversion in what were to become Christian mini-states within Japan. Although they were not always banned from preaching in a fiefdom where the local lord was not a Christian, the situation was of course much easier where they had official support. Also, whatever their motives had first been in converting, many local warlords went on to become sincere believers.

In their emphasis on converting the upper classes, the methods of the Jesuits contrasted greatly with those of the Franciscan friars who were arriving in Japan in increasing numbers from the 1590s. The friars aimed their message of salvation at the poor, opening hospitals for lepers and assisting the outcasts in Japanese society. The Jesuits saw this as counter-productive and were quick to condemn the "barefoot friars". After Japan's rulers began to crack down on Christianity, the Jesuits felt that the Franciscans were far too visible. They refused to wear anything but their habits, conspicuously used images of the cross, preached openly and were too quick to criticise the Jesuits and the Portuguese, while boasting of the power of the King of Spain. Although the Jesuits had wanted to avoid the impression that Christians were split like the sects of Buddhism, there was great rivalry between nationalities and orders and the Jesuits were as argumentative as any.

So much for the squabbling missionaries. What about the Japanese? It's difficult to know what the early converts thought and felt as there is very little left that was written by them. We do know that, especially at first, much of the preaching had to be done through other Japanese and so the Christian message would have been expressed in terms that were at least familiar.

The importance of the work of Japanese Christians in converting their compatriots and sustaining Japanese converts is something to which western scholars have devoted relatively little time and is something that I intend to research more in the future. This is not to say, however, that their contribution has been ignored.

Some of the Japanese preachers, such as the early convert known as Brother Lawrence are well known. Brother Lawrence was a blind musician who used his own musical versions of prayers and teachings, and who (very interestingly) is said to have believed in the validity of all Japanese religions in that they led to the ultimate truth – Christianity – a view that would not have been expressed by the European Jesuits. Many later converts also took an important role in looking after parishes between the infrequent visits from a priest, becoming almost as important as the priest himself although they weren't ordained.

Originally the Jesuits had been impressed with the great willingness to study and learn on the part of the Japanese, and it was proposed that a native clergy would be educated and eventually native Bishops would be appointed. At first progress was good. Japanese seminarians were taken on from an early age and learned Japanese language and literature as well as the subjects that would prepare them for ordination. However, their progress was disappointing. Their Latin was said to be weak and they had little inclination for, or ability in, speculative studies. Ordination was delayed – there was opposition from Rome – and many would-be priests became frustrated and disillusioned.

In spite of this, the European missionaries and their Japanese converts continued to teach the message of Christianity, at first overcoming language barriers with the use of music and symbols, later using converts as interpreters and using a variety of books published in Japan, in Japanese. Many of these books, like the *Doctriina Kirishitan* I mentioned earlier, set out the basic concepts of Christianity. Conversions would be made through steps similar to the following: 1) The Catechism would be explained; 2) The mistakes of Buddhism would be explained; 3) The concept of one God would be explained; 4) The Second Coming was taught; 5) The Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria and the Ten Commandments were taught; 6) If at this point the convert hadn't given up, he or she would attend Mass, undertake Confession, and finally take Communion.⁷⁾ All this would be more or less taken on board by the Japanese convert, who would then live as a Japanese Catholic following a version of the faith that would have been pretty much recognizable to a contemporary European. Aspects of religious life were adopted, with the Japanese putting great store in ritual and the chanting of prayers (this latter was reminiscent of the chanting of Buddhist sutra – repeated prayers were thought by many Japanese to have magical powers, with Latin prayers thought to be more mystical than others) .

Some were converted and lived their lives as Christians even without frequent access to the European missionaries or their churches. One famous example is Grace Hosokawa, a nobleman's wife who was baptised by her convert maid while she was under house arrest and unable to meet the missionaries herself. She saw almost nothing of the Jesuits, or of other Japanese Christians, but her writings reveal a direct and personal relationship with God.

There is no doubt that the faith of many of the converts was indeed sincere. The final step of conversion for many was preparation for martyrdom. Many found that their relationship with God sustained them through terrible physical and mental trials. There are said to have been between two to five thousand martyrdoms between the total ban on Christianity in 1614 and 1643. Numbers of Japanese martyrs vary, but the number of Europeans amongst them is usually said to be only about seventy; the vast majority of those who died for their faith were Japanese. Others chose to take their faith underground.

I would like to end today with a quotation from a pamphlet prepared for Japanese converts who could expect to face death for their faith by crucifixion, burning, drowning, or any number of other dreadful methods. “When martyrdom is imminent you have to prepare yourself with a confession. ... Never cherish an evil thought toward ... the executioner. ... While being tortured visualise the Passion of Jesus. Think intently that Santa Maria, many Angels and Blessed ones are looking upon your fight from Heaven ... God shall tender a special help.”⁸⁾

Notes

- 1) Boxer, C. R. *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.38
- 2) Ceislik, Hubert S.J. in Turnbull, Stephen. *Japan's Hidden Christians 1549–1999: Volume One, Open Christianity in Japan 1549–1639* (Richmond: Curzon Press 2000), p. 29
- 3) Moran, J.F. *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth Century Japan* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.97
- 4) Boxer, C.R. *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650*, p.79
- 5) Breen, John and Williams, Mark eds. *Japan and Christianity: Impacts and Responses* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.3
- 6) Moran, J.F. *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth Century Japan*, p.104
- 7) Boxer, C.R. *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650*, p.220
- 8) Ibid. p.354

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