

The Immortality of the Soul and Japan : the Worldwide Problem of the Italian Renaissance

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Today I would like to concentrate upon a philosophical and theological aspect of Japan's "Christian Century": the problem of the human soul's immortality. Why was the age called the Christian Century and why was this problem brought into the Japan? How should we consider its times? It was English historian Charles Boxer (1904–2000) who first used the term "Christian Century" in his famous book published in 1951¹. This period and its designation as the Christian Century are of special significance to Japanese history because Christianity was the first new major religious option in the ten centuries since the introduction of Buddhism.

Christianity arrived in Japan by way of European missionaries², among whom Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) were prominent. I want to notice these two Fathers, who were active in Asia, namely Goa, Macau and Japan, from 1542 (the year of Xavier's arrival at Goa) to 1606 (the year of Valignano's death at Macau). Xavier reached Japan in 1549 with two his disciples, Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernández, and one Japanese Anjiro (Yajiro), Paulo di Santa Fé, converted from the Buddhism to the Christianity in India. Valignano followed Xavier thirty years later in 1579, appointed as Visitor (*Visitator* in Latin) to the East, which represented a vast area stretching from Mozambique to Japan. He was in sole charge of all the Jesuit missions and missionaries inside this area.

It is possible to observe Japan's "Christian Century" receiving multi-layered influences of Western culture and philosophy through them. In what follows, I will principally address Xavier, Valignano and their attitude toward the Japanese way of thinking in light of their historical and intellectual backgrounds. Whether the human soul's

¹ Charles Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549–1650*, Manchester 1993(1951). Id., *Portuguese Merchants and Missionaries in Feudal Japan, 1543–1640*, Aldershot : Ashgate 1986. Cfr. Adriana Boscaro, *Ventura e sventura dei gesuiti in Giappone (1549–1639)*, Venezia 2008.

² About mission from which the missionary comes, see Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2008, 14–15.

immortality is true or not was the greatest and the most interesting problem in this period of Japan they encountered, called Christian Century. I will consider the problem and its meaning in both histories of the West and the Japan.

(1)

Xavier was a Jesuit, or one of the original members of the Society of Jesus³. This Society originated from the organization by Ignatius de Loyola together with Xavier and five of their friends at Paris in 1534. Xavier was Loyola's closest friend and classmate at the University of Paris, the conservative theological center of northern Europe. In 1537, Xavier left Paris for Italy with them, after having graduated from *la Sorbonne*, not returning to the homeland Spain, unlike his father who had graduated from the university of Bologna in Italy. Xavier and his comrades hoped to take ship in Venice and visit Jerusalem as pilgrims. This attempt was unsuccessful, so they decided to go to Rome to pay homage to the papacy. Their activity was recognized as a religious order by Pope Paul III (*Regimini militantis ecclesiae*) in 1540.

Xavier became the first Jesuit missionary sent outside Europe to propagate the Catholic faith. Arriving in Japan, he hoped to visit "universities" in the old imperial capital of Kyoto and in the feudal 'quartier latin', Ashikaga of Kanto, today north of Tokyo, in order to dispute theological and philosophical problems with the local scholars, on the basis of his own university experience in Europe. The Ashikaga-Gakko, college for Buddhist Studies, was well known to Xavier. But he was not successful in finding such institutions, all the more that Kyoto had been devastated by continual wars called the Age of Civil Wars of Japanese History (1467[1493]–1590[1583]).

Apart from his hope and dream, the letters written and sent from Japan by Xavier strongly influenced many Europeans, among whom there was Guillaume Postel. Postel's interest in the newly discovered Asia and America motivated him to publish *Des merveilles du monde, et principalement des admirables choses des Indes et du nouveau monde* (Paris, 1553)⁴. In this work he described Japan as an ideal isle on the basis of the informations from the letters. Postel was allowed to enter the Jesuit Order by Loyola himself. Around 1555 he then conceived a strange, but sincere, story of the

³ Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier : his Life, his Times*, translated by M. Joseph Costelloe, Rome : Jesuit Historical Institute, 1973–1982, 4 vols.

⁴ Henri Bernard-Maitre S.J., L'orientaliste Guillaume Postel et la découverte spirituelle du Japon en 1552, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 9/1–2 (April 1953), 85–108.

Venetian Virgin, who would save mankind⁵. It was about this period that Valignano frequented *lo studio padovano*, the University of the Venetian Republic.

Xavier managed to carry out a series of serious debates on a key issue: the immortality of the human soul. Not only Xavier but also later missionaries emphasized this doctrine. Indeed at Fukushoji (Fukusho-temple) in Kagoshima, his first landing city in Kyushu, Xavier once had a friendly discussion or dialogue with Ninshitu, a bonze of Zen, a Buddhist sect advocating the mortality of the human soul. The bonze told him that death is the end of every human being, and there was no afterlife⁶. In Paris, Xavier studied Scholastic and Thomistic theology based on Aristotelian philosophy. Here at the same time, Lefèvre d'Étapes, disciple of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, was trying to establish a new interpretation of Aristotle colored with mysticism. Interestingly enough, Xavier would have been also influenced by Renaissance Platonism. In response to the Buddhist negation of the afterlife, he emphasized the human soul's immortality, acknowledging the Lateran principle, although I think so, and conforming to the Catholic article of faith, as I'll tell you soon.

Xavier was also surprised to observe the locals' misunderstanding of the Christian deity in Yamaguchi in Honshu. They identified the immortal God of Christians with the Buddhist principal being, called Daiusu in Japanese. Knowing the situation, he interpreted the Daiusu as the "prime matter" (*prima materia*)⁷. To eliminate the propagation of this kind of misunderstanding, Xavier decided not to translate key terms of Christianity such as God, angel and soul any longer. Instead, he directly adopted Western terms in his evangelical mission in Japan⁸. The doctrine of the human soul's immortality became a principal feature of his teaching. This direction was to be maintained by his faithful disciples Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernández. Through their letters to the comrades in Europe, they reported the controversy about this issue with the Buddhists again in Yamaguchi in 1551⁹.

To understand the European context of the doctrine of the human soul's immortal-

⁵ Marion Leathers Kuntz, *Venice, Myth and Utopian Thought in the Sixteenth Century : Bodin, Posel and the Virgin of Venice*, Aldershot : Ashgate , c1999.

⁶ Luís Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, 1976, I, 26–27.

⁷ Fróis, *ibid.*, I, 40.

⁸ Schurhammer, *Das kirchliche Sprachproblem in der japanischen Jesuitenmission des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, Tokyo 1928. Johannes Laures, St. Francis Xavier at Yamaguchi, in *Contemporary Japan : a Review of Japanese Affairs*, July–Dec., 1948, The Foreign Affairs Association of Japan 1949, 264–281.

⁹ Schurhammer, *Die Disputationen des P. Cosme de Torres S.J. mit den Buddhisten in Yamaguchi im Jahre 1551 : nach den Briefen des P. Torres und dem Protokoll seines Dolmetschers Br. Juan Fernandez S.J.*, (Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, Bd. 24, T. A), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1929.

ity, the University of Padua held the key. Padua was one of Europe's most important learning centers for philosophy, medicine and law. It belonged to the Republic of Venice, which was the free and powerful *serenissima* country.

Before the doctrine of the human soul's immortality became prominent in the broader philosophical scene, the theory of the intellect's unity was taught at Padua's faculty of arts. This Averroist unity of the intellect did not acknowledge the immortality of the individual human soul¹⁰. Bishop Pietro Barozzi was not happy with this Averroist doctrine. He preferred the teachings of Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino, his favorite writer, who advocated the human soul's immortality in his masterpiece *Platonic Theology, Theologia platonica de immortalitate animorum* published in 1482¹¹.

With the effort of Barozzi and others, the immortality of the human soul was adopted as the article of the faith at the fifth Lateran Council in Rome in 1513. Here is its decree *apostolici regiminis*:

And since truth cannot contradict truth, we define that every statement, contrary to the enlightened truth of the faith is totally is today false and we strictly forbid teaching otherwise to be permitted. We decree that all those who cling to erroneous statements of this kind [that is to say, the rejection of the immortality of soul, of the resurrection of body and of the eternal rewards and eternal punishments], thus sowing heresies which are wholly condemned, should be avoided in every way and punished as detestable and odious heretics and infidels who are undermining the Catholic faith. Moreover, we strictly enjoin each and every philosopher who teaches publicly in the universities or elsewhere, that when they explain or introduce to their audiences the principles or conclusions of philosophers, where these are known to deviate from the true faith — as in the assertion of the soul's mortality or of there being only one soul or the eternity of the world and other topics of this kind — they are obliged to devote their every effort to clarify for their listeners the truth of the Christian religion, to teach it by convincing arguments, so far as this is possible, and to apply themselves to the full extent of their energies to refuting and disposing of the philosophers opposing arguments, since all the solutions are

¹⁰ About a little complicated history, see Dag Nikolaus Hasse, Arabic Philosophy and Averroism, in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, edited by James Hankins, Cambridge University Press, New York 2007, 113–136.

¹¹ John Monfasani, Aristotelians, Platonists, and the Missing Ockamists: Philosophical Liberty in Pre-Reformation Italy, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. XLVI, No.2, 247–276.

available. (Cumque verum vero minime contradicat, omnem assertionem veritati illuminatae fidei contrariam, omnino falsam esse definimus, et ut aliter dogmatizare non liceat, districtius inhibemus: omnesque huiusmodi erroris assertionibus inhaerentes, veluti damnatissimas haereses seminantes, per omnia, ut detestabiles et abhominabiles haereticos et infidels, catholicam fidem labefactantes, vitandos et puniendos fore decernimus. Insuper omnibus et singulis philosophis in universitatibus studiorum generalium, et alibi publice legentibus, districte praecipiendo mandamus, ut cum philosophorum principia aut conclusiones, in quibus a recta fide deviare noscuntur, auditoribus suis legerint, seu explanaverint, quale hoc de animae mortalitate aut unitate, et mundi aeternitate, ac alia huiusmodi, teneantur eisdem veritatem religionis christianae omni conatu manifestam facere, et persuadendo pro posse docere, ac omni studio huiusmodi philosophorum argumenta, cum omnia solubilia existant, pro viribus excludere atque resolvere.)¹².

Here the task of philosophers is clearly determined. The decree seems to have been influenced by the revival of Platonism in *Quattrocento* Florence, where Ficino lived and taught for a long time.

However, before and even after that year 1513, Pietro Pomponazzi, student at Padua in his youth and professor at Padua, Bologna and Ferrara, defended the possibility of the death of human beings' individual souls on the basis of Aristotelian philosophy and reason. Among his students at Padua, there was a future cardinal, Gasparo Contarini, from a noble Venetian family. He was sympathetic to the Society of Jesus and did not accept the theory of his master¹³.

(2)

Now let us turn to the second major figure of the Jesuit missionaries in Japan, Alessandro Valignano¹⁴. He was born in Italy, in the town of Chieti in 1539. Chieti is a ma-

¹² *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Norman P. Tanner S.J., Volume One, Nicaea I to Lateran V, Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press 1990, 605-606.

¹³ Kenichi Nejime, Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542) and the Philosophical, Theological Tendency toward the Council of Trento (1545-1563), in *Seiyoshi Ronso* IIIVI(2014), 25-38. This paper is forthcoming.

¹⁴ J.F. Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits. Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth-Century Japan*, London and New York 1993. Augusto Luca, *Alessandro Valignano. La missione come dialogo con i popoli e le culture*, Editrice missionaria italiana 2005.

lor city in the Abruzzi facing the Adriatic Sea. At that time, this region was part of the Kingdom of Naples under Spanish rule. The Adriatic Sea connected this *paese* with the Republic of Venice. Valignano then went to Padua to study jurisprudence under the aegis of the Republic. He graduated with a degree in law in 1557. Later he was remembered for his ability to settle legal issues that occurred in Japan.

Valignano reached Japan in 1579, as I said before. His first stay continued until 20 February 1582. Returning from Kyoto in Honshu to Nagasaki in Kyushu during his first visit to Japan in early 1580s, he saw the harbor town of Sakai near Kyoto. This merchant town could remind him of the Italian Republic. “Sakai is, he writes, one of the foremost, wealthiest, and most famous cities in the entire country. Not only is it a city of considerable size, the home of many rich merchants, but it is also a free city, a sort of republic (*a maniera de republica*) which has always enjoyed great privileges and liberties”¹⁵.

His way of thinking may be perhaps influenced by the myth of Venice, free, perfect and peaceful country, for Contarini wrote the famous *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* which not only tremendously contributed to the understanding of the structure and function of the Republic, but also emphatically idealized it. I suppose that Valignano might know this well-known book. And his ideal city-republic would be reflected in *De missione legatorum Japoniensium ad Romanam curiam, rebusque in Europa, ac toto itinere animaduersis dialogus*¹⁶. The great book gives us the tremendously detailed descriptions of many cities and towns in the Italian peninsular. It includes political, social, cultural informations on those days.

Sen-no-rikyuu (1522–91), master of the tea ceremony was born in Sakai. Valignano himself was greatly interested in this art and so described the ceremony in detail in *Advertimentos e avisos acerca dos costumes e catangus de Jappão*¹⁷. In such a book is seen the policy of acculturation. Was it quite accidental that Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili, his followers, were Italian Jesuits? Is it possible that the humanistic culture of the Italian Renaissance influenced their attitude toward other cultures in the atmosphere of the globalization?

¹⁵ Josef Franz Schütte, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*. Volume I. From His Appointment as Visitor until His First Departure from Japan (1573–1582). Part II: The Solution (1580–1582), Anand -India 1985, 138. This edition is the English version of the following original version. Josef Franz Schütte, S.J., *Valignanos Missionsgrundsätze für Japan*. I. Band Von der Ernennung zum Visitor bis zum ersten Abschied von Japan (1573–1582). I. Teil: Das Problem (1573–1580), Roma 1951. II. Teil: Die Lösung (1580–1582), Roma 1958.

¹⁶ Duarte de Sande, S.J. in *Macaensi portu Sinici regni, anno 1590*.

¹⁷ *Il cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*, a cura di Josef Franz Schütte, S.J., Roma 1946.

By the way, Valignano founded a Collegio on the basis of *studia humanitatis*. And he sent the Mission of Youths to the European catholic countries, although Xavier had previously sent two Japanese to Europe and one of them, Bernardo (of whose real, true name we don't know) born in Kagoshima, had reached Lisbon, visited Loyola in Rome and studied in Coimbra as a Jesuit. It was Valignano that organized the first Japanese embassy, so-called Tensho Ken'oh Shisetsu, including Ito Mancio, Chijiwa Miguel, Hara Martino, and Nakaura Giuliano to Europe from 1582 to 1590¹⁸. Their ability of understanding and speaking Latin was not low. Their difficult trip and experiences were minutely described in *De missione legatorum Japoniensium*. Accompanying this Embassy on its return, Valignano introduced the movable type printing from Europe, and had European classics translated into Japanese. The Jesuit library in Japan contained many pagan writers, not only Cicero and Virgil but also Caesar, Sallust, Horace and Martial.

To grasp Valignano's philosophical tendency, it is important to examine his university education. To this end, I would like to point out characteristic features of Padua. It is well known that medieval and Renaissance universities in Europe consisted of four faculties: arts, law, medicine and theology. At Padua, arts and medicine together formed one faculty, while both canon and civil law represented another faculty along with notarial arts. Generally speaking, faculties of theology were nonexistent in Italy, unlike Paris and Oxford.

At Padua's faculty of arts, students learned the philosophy of Aristotle for medicine and the practical sciences, not for theology. The teaching they received can be characterized as wholly secular. It was often called "secular Aristotelianism" to reflect this distinctive feature. Valignano's consciousness of the three Aristotelian principles of learning, that is, authority, reason and experience, is prominent in his writings. Here authority means the philosophy of Aristotle and his commentators. But this authority was not absolute for Valignano. Facing the unfamiliar traditions and customs of Japan, he emphasized reason and experience, degrading learned authority and abandoning preconceived opinions.

In addition, the Collegio Romano was founded as the educational center of the Jesuits in 1551. It became the largest and best-known institution of higher education in Italy. In 1556, Pope Paul IV conferred on the Jesuits the right to award doctorates in arts and theology to its students. However, this institution was not a university, be-

¹⁸ Boscaro, *op. cit.*, 100-105.

cause it neither taught nor awarded degrees in law and medicine, although Valignano also studied at the the Collegio¹⁹.

(3)

Whereas Xavier visited Japan only once and stayed two years and three months, Valignano travelled three times and dwelled for some ten years as Visitor subject only to the General, the Pope and God. Valignano, in his turn, studied law at Padua, where the secular Aristotelian tradition of logic and reason was dominant. Aristotle remained vague about the human soul's immortality, and his commentators did not fully establish the human soul's survival after death. But Valignano emphasized the immortality and the survival in his *Catechismus Christianae fidei*.

Valignano respected Xavier as a spiritual guide and described Xavier's life of virtue and ardent apostolate in his work, *Indian History*. Nonetheless, he also criticized it for tolerating the credulity of people who construe extraordinary natural events as miracles. In this case, Valignano can be regarded as a good disciple of Pomponazzi for the denial of such events as miracles. Perhaps he also knew the idea of Ficino according whom miracles would occur less frequently in his age than in antiquity. Valignano was convinced that a plausible explanation of these phenomena was required in order to persuade non-believers, even if such a theory was not based on Ficinian Platonism.

Pedro Gómez, a Spanish Aristotelian and Valignano's Jesuit companion, earnestly taught the human soul's immortality at Japan's Jesuit *collegium* of Nagasaki in the late sixteenth century, as is shown in his work *Compendium catholicae veritatis*, textbook for the collegio, together with two other textbooks, *de sphaera* and *de anima*. Although Gómez was a graduate of University of Coimbra, he vehemently criticized Buddhism owing mainly to his interpretation that the religion of Buddha regarded the death of the human soul as being quite natural and inevitable. He tried to impose the truth of Christianity and the correctness of the doctrine of the human soul's immortality on local students' mind quite in the same way as Xavier and Valignano²⁰. In another occasion I hope to explain more in detail Gómez's historical position that I'll consider it through many trends of the Renaissance Aristotelianism and Platonic pa-

¹⁹ Nejime, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) between Padua and Japan, in *Gakushuinjyoshidaigakukiyo*, XVI(2014), 43-52.

²⁰ Frédéric Girard, The *Compendium Catholicae Veritatis* of Pedro Gomz in Japanese Translation (1595) and Japanese Religion (in Japanese), in *Toyono Shiso to Shukyo*, XXVIII(2011), 1-53.

ganism.

The so-called “Christian Century” in Japanese history ended around the middle of the seventeenth century. The country completely closed its doors to clergymen and laymen from the Catholic countries of southern Europe. Only the Netherlanders were allowed to carry out their business for 200 more years. However, from the first half of the eighteenth century on, Japanese intellectuals could read the works on Christianity in Chinese translations. Among these works, there was a very important treatise, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (天主実義), composed by Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci. Leading the Christian mission in China, Ricci expounded in this work the differences between Christianity and other local religions such as Confucianism, Taoism (Daoism) and Buddhism. Valignano knew his talented disciple well since he went to Ricci’s hometown Macerata as the rector of its Jesuit college. The work of another Italian, Giulio Alleni, follower of Ricci and Valignano, was also translated into Chinese and imported to Japan too.

Ironically, Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), one of the most important Japanese philosopher and Shintoist of the nineteenth century, learned Christian ideas through these Chinese translations. As is seen in his work, *Honkyo Gaihen* (本経外篇), key ideas such as the human soul’s immortality and survival along with reward and punishment in the afterlife were integrated into his own interpretation of Japan’s native and traditional religion, Shintoism. He also edited the treatise *The Tale of the Rebirth of Katsugoro* (勝五郎再生記聞), which tells a story similar to that found in the anecdote and legend of Marsilio Ficino. Ficino appeared to one of the best friend to confirm the real existence of the afterlife and the true theory of the immortality of the individual soul²¹. These Christian and Platonic elements were just some aspects of the multi-layered philosophy of Atsutane. Posthumously, his eclectic synthesis of ideas had a considerable impact on the nationalistic Shintoist ideology behind the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The latter replaced the Tokugawa Shogunate, which had condemned many Christians to death.

In conclusion; the Europe at last reached Japan, zipangu, situated in the Far East and transported the Renaissance thought to my country. In it was included the influential idea of the immortality of the Renaissance Europe. This idea, becoming worldwide, met with the Japanese way of thinking and behavior during the Christian cen-

²¹ Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficini* (1433–1499), Paris 1956, 578–579.

ture in our history. Outwardly and physically our ancestors finally selected the isolation policy. But intellectually they continuously interested themselves in the Platonism and the Christianity of the West in “the Prolonged Christian Century” , as shown in a rather rare case of Hirata Atsutane and in critical Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725), a Neo-Confucian scholar, to whom I never refer here and who had interrogated Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1668–1714) about Europe and the world²². First of all, Xavier, Valignano, and Gómez, to name but a few, noticed our intellectual curiosity and inquiring mind, and so I think that they devoted all their energies to the confirmation of the immortality of the soul to make them believe in God.

That’s all. Thank you for your kind attention.

P.S. This paper follows my discourses given at two cities in 2014.

- 1) The Renaissance Society of America. Annual Meeting, New York City, U.S.A., 27–29 March 2014.
- 2) International Conference at ISIG, Bruno Kessler Foundation, Trento, Italy, 30–31 October 2014.

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²² P. Henri Bernard, S.J., *Les premiers rapports de la culture européenne avec la civilization*, Tokyo 1938, 71–72.