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## **Saints, Sects, and (Holy) Sites: The Jesuit Mapping of Japanese Buddhism (Sixteenth Century)**

### **Introduction**

This essay explores the way in which Jesuit missionaries in Japan created and handled knowledge about Buddhism in the second half of the sixteenth-century. Missionaries collected information on Buddhism for several decades and these efforts resulted in the compilation of an ample corpus of documents consisting of letters and reports. By creating accounts on different aspects of Japanese practice and belief, Jesuits repeatedly tried to understand and organise the diversity of Japanese Buddhism, with the hope of providing an explanation of its nature to their Western audiences.

The present essay reconsiders relatively well-known authors and sources to draw a comprehensive genealogy of missionary discourse on Japanese Buddhism between the 1540s and the 1580s. This analysis has been made possible by a systematic engagement with the whole body of printed sources that the Jesuits produced on Japan, supported by the use of manuscript sources. We have been able to survey this material thanks to the creation of a Data Collection, in which references to Japanese religious matters were transcribed and classified.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on these data, we have tracked variations on the first European discourse on Buddhism and the changing patterns in the interactions between missionaries and Buddhist monks.<sup>2</sup>

This study focuses on the years between the 1540s and the 1580s, as this was the period when a Jesuit narrative on Japanese Buddhism was first produced. The material we have interrogated has revealed that the production of this narrative did not follow a consistent method, but underwent numerous changes depending on how data were collected and the specific aims their collection and processing served on a mission-wide level. Our examination has also brought to the fore that providing a complete and coherent picture of Buddhism was not always essential for the missionaries, who accorded varying importance to different pieces of

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1 This work was carried out as part of the project *Interactions Between Rivals. The Christian Mission and Buddhist Sects in Japan (c.1549–c.1647)*. See “The Project Data Collection”, pp.43-45 of this volume. All the translations included in this essay are by the authors, except where indicated.

2 Other scholars have carried out an in-depth analysis of theological elements in Jesuit writings of this period and the corresponding Buddhist doctrine. A representative work is App, *The Cult of Emptiness. The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy*. Rorschach; Kyoto: UniversityMedia, 2012.

information available to them. Yet, it can be posited that the Jesuits arranged their data in specific categories and this allowed them to create a working system to frame and make sense of the information they collected.

This essay draws a broad-stroke picture of the major features that the Jesuits used to classify and describe Japanese Buddhism and explores the logic behind that selection. Particular attention is given to the terminology that was employed to identify Buddhist institutions, deities and beliefs. This helps us understand how the Jesuit construction of Buddhism fluctuated between the need to posit it as a different religion than Christianity and the acknowledgement of its similarity to Christianity. We then bring into focus specific Japanese devotional practices repeatedly mentioned in missionary sources. These narratives reveal how Jesuits appreciated Buddhist rituals and the piety that engendered them, exemplifying the difficulty of positing Japanese Buddhism as “the other.”

## Jesuit Writing Practices

A stratified, complex organisation such as the Society of Jesus, in which obedience was seen as fundamental both from a practical and spiritual point of view, needed to maintain secure ties between its various operational levels in order to guarantee the functionality of the whole institution.<sup>3</sup> The organisation of the Society of Jesus was mostly based on continuous, well-kept correspondence.<sup>4</sup> This was true for those Jesuits in Europe who, especially in the early years of the Society, communicated through letters to create a “union of hearts” and to help sustain the image of the Society that had been built by its founders’ official texts, the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions*.<sup>5</sup> This was also true of the missions established in other continents, such as Asia or the Americas: the wide geographical spread Jesuits had attained meant that letters were the most common tool for a steady exchange of information, and thus for a successful centralised administration.<sup>6</sup> The need to keep in touch with the European headquarters was a key element in the ongoing

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3 For a detailed description of the workings of the Society, see Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise: The Society of Jesus in Portugal, Its Empire, and Beyond, 1540–1750*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp.229–253.

4 Pinto, *Uma Imagem do Japão. A Aristocracia Guerreira Nipônica nas Cartas Jesuítas de Évora (1598)*. Macau: Instituto Português do Oriente; Fundação Oriente, 2004, pp.30–31; p.48.

5 O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1993, pp.62–63.

6 See, for example, Friedrich, “‘Government in India and Japan is different from government in Europe’: Asian Jesuits on Infrastructure, Administrative Space, and the Possibilities for a Global Management of Power”. *Journal of Jesuit Studies* vol. 4 (2017), pp.1–27.

construction of the missionary enterprise itself.<sup>7</sup> Further, missionary correspondence was supposed to edify all readers, regardless of who they were, so that it could contribute to spreading the news of evangelisation and support missionary propaganda. Many letters were printed in various languages and did indeed reach a vast public in Catholic Europe.<sup>8</sup>

According to the rules drafted by Ignatius Loyola's secretary, Juan Alfonso de Polanco (1517–1576), each mission had to write to the General and their brethren in Europe on an annual basis. This was not always possible. Before 1580, in particular, Jesuits operating in the Japanese archipelago kept contact mainly with Goa, the seat of the Provincial of India, on whom they depended.<sup>9</sup> From there, their most important missives were redirected to Lisbon and Rome.<sup>10</sup> However, these letters might be lost along the way, which limited contacts with Europe even more.

During the mission's early years, missives sent from Japan consisted of both personal epistles and general letters. The first type was limited in scope, reporting the experiences and opinions of a single Jesuit. The second type consisted of information gathered from various missionaries scattered across the archipelago, put together by a missionary especially appointed to this task. The aim of these letters was to convey a well-rounded image of the activities of the whole mission. Some letters would be made public and printed. Standard correspondence was also reinforced by occasional reports, generally sent by local superiors to the headquarters of the Province or Rome; these reports usually remained unpublished.<sup>11</sup> In the 1580s, Visitor Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) regulated the practice of letter-writing for an internal audience and imposed a stricter adherence to the facts and problems of the mission, over the preoccupation with edifying potential Jesuit readers.<sup>12</sup> In 1578 he instituted the 'Annual letter,' a special missive which

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7 Torres Londoño, "Escrevendo cartas. Jesuítas, escrita e missão no século XVI". *Revista Brasileira de História* vol. 22, no. 43 (2002), p.13.

8 Pinto, 'Tragédia mais Gloriosa que Dolorosa.' *O Discurso Missionário sobre a Perseguição aos Cristãos no regime Tokugawa na Imprensa Europeia (1598–1650)*. PhD in History, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (NOVA FCSH), 2014.

9 Japan was initially part of the Province of India. It became a Vice-Province of its own only in 1581.

10 Bourdon, *La Compagnie de Jésus et le Japon 1547–1570. La Fondation de la mission japonaise par François Xavier (1547–1551) et les premiers résultats de la prédication chrétienne sous le supérieurat de Cosme de Torres (1551–1570)*. Paris; Lisbonne: Centre Culturel Portugais de la Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian; Commission Nationale pour les Commémorations des Découvertes Portugaises, 1993, p.21.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 Correspondence between Visitor Alessandro Valignano and General Claudio Aquaviva often deals with this topic; *Ibidem*, p.22. See, for example, the letter from Macao, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1593, in *Documenta Indica*. vol. 16, Joseph Wicki, S.J.; John Gomes (Ed.). Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1984, pp.56–57 (henceforth: *DI*).

would systematically report the most important events of the year and could be printed and widely disseminated.

Jesuit writings were also influenced by circumstantial factors: not all texts were written in Japan, not all Jesuits had the same level of education, knowledge of the Japanese language, or ability to write elegantly and succinctly. This was particularly true of the first decade of the mission, when manpower was sorely lacking. This also explains why most of the earlier sources rely on only a handful of writers: Cosme de Torres (c. 1510–1570), Luís Fróis (1532–1597), and Baltazar Gago (c.1515/20–1583).

The specific context in which a text was composed always influenced the information it presented. In the case of letters, selecting the information to be provided had to take account of such factors as their recipients; the writer's specific position both geographically and within the Asian enterprise's chain of command; and how much time the missionary had for writing activities. In the case of reports and printed letters, the prospective readers were an additional conditioning element.

A direct consequence of these conditions is that early materials do not offer a monolithic discourse on Buddhism. A single, official position on Buddhism was adopted only much later, in the 1580s, and it is not by chance that it was formulated at a time when missionary policy was being completely overhauled. It is therefore not possible to speak of a single Jesuit understanding of Buddhism through time.

## **Buddhism as a Degenerated Form of Christianity (1546–1551)**

The first flow of information on Japanese Buddhism that reached Europe comes from Jorge Álvares (n.d.–1552), a Portuguese merchant who had visited the country. Between 1546 and 1547 he wrote a report for Francis Xavier (1506–1552) in which he outlined various aspects of Japan and briefly described its religious landscape.

According to this report, Japan had two kinds of “prayer houses” (*casas de oração*), that is, religious buildings. The first of these housed “fathers” (*padres*), who were called *bonzos* (from *bōzu*, Buddhist monk) and whose lifestyle was very similar to that of European religious orders. Álvares stated that their scriptures and rites had come from China, as they seemed similar to what he had seen there. The second type of “house,” by contrast, was comprised of “friars” (*frades*), who carried a bead rosary so that they could be recognised as religious men, prayed for the dead and the sick, and were helped in this by women. Álvares provided an overall positive description of the Japanese religious landscape, noting over and over again how much it resembled Christianity.

A more analytical framework to interpret Japanese Buddhism starts to emerge in a 1548 report written by Jesuit Nicolao Lancillotto (n.d.–1558).<sup>13</sup> This document

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13 On the life and missionary activity of Nicolao Lancillotto (or Niccolò Lancillotti), see Roscioni, *Il desiderio delle Indie*. Turin: Einaudi, 2001, pp.45–64.

summarises the conversations between Francis Xavier and his first Japanese convert, Anjirō.<sup>14</sup> The nature of the questions posed to Anjirō demonstrates that the missionaries expected to find traces of Christianity, albeit in a corrupted form, in Japanese beliefs and rituals.<sup>15</sup> This approach was not specific to Japan, but resulted from three key assumptions within the Catholic worldview. The first was that God had imparted knowledge of natural law to every human being.<sup>16</sup> The second was that all mankind descended from Noah's sons and therefore had inherited some knowledge of the true God; time, however, had distorted this knowledge.<sup>17</sup> The third assumption was that Thomas the Apostle (n.d.–53 CE) had preached across Asia before been martyred in Mylapore, India. Missionaries postulated that if the memory of a past knowledge of Christianity could be brought back, this would provide a stepping-stone for engaging with future converts, and instead of teaching them anew they would only need to correct and restore their beliefs. This conceptual framework was also used to explain why the beliefs and rituals the missionaries encountered in Asia appeared similar to Catholic ones, albeit in a “degenerated” form: the precise nature of God had been forgotten, the Jesuits maintained and only a pale echo remained.

An example of this conceptual structure at work can be found in an account of the origins of Japanese religion, which Lancillotto included in the report sent to the General in Rome:

“The people of China and Japan keep the same [religious] laws [...] We believe that some heretic Christians have preached in China, given the similarities between their customs and ours. Here in Cochín, there is a very old Armenian bishop, who has taught for forty-five years the things of our faith to the Saint Thomas' Christians, in

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- 14 On the little information available about Anjirō, who had been converted in Malacca, see *Documentos del Japón*, vol. 1 (1547–1557). Juan Ruiz-de-Medina, S.J. (Ed.). Roma: Instituto Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús, 1990, pp.31\*–32\*, (henceforth: *Documentos*); and App, “Francis Xavier's Discovery of Japanese Buddhism. A Chapter in the European Discovery of Buddhism (Part 1: Before the Arrival in Japan, 1547–1549)”, *The Eastern Buddhist* vol. 30, no.1 (1997), pp.61–63.
- 15 Elisonas, “An Itinerary to the Terrestrial Paradise. Early European Reports on Japan and a Contemporary Exegesis”. *Itinerario* vol. 20, no. 3 (1996), pp.25–68. Lancillotto wrote two reports from the information he collected and sent them to Rome (*Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.44–69; pp.69–76).
- 16 This was an important point in early exchanges between the missionaries and the Japanese (see, for example, Juan Fernández to Francis Xavier, Yamaguchi, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1551, *Ibidem*, p.255). Cf. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times*. vol. IV, *Japan and China 1549–1552*. Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1982, p.222.
- 17 Gelders; Balagangadhara, “Rethinking Orientalism: Colonialism and the Study of Indian Traditions”. *History of Religions* vol. 51, no. 2 (2011), p.109.

Malabar. This bishop says that the Armenians, at the times of the primitive Church, went to China to preach and there they made many converts.<sup>18</sup>

This story appears to be a further elaboration of the information obtained from Anjirō. According to the latter, Japanese religion was founded by a holy man by the name of “Sciacca” (Śākyamuni), who preached about “one single god, creator of all things.” He was born “more than one thousand and five hundred years ago, in a land beyond China, in the Western direction, which the Chinese call Cengicco.” Unaware that “Cengicco” (Jp. Tenjiku) was the Japanese name for India, Lancillotto suggested that such land “could be near Scythia.”<sup>19</sup> These and other details framed the figure of Sciacca as a distorted memory of the life of Jesus.

The image of a bygone Christianity also appears in the description of the religious practices and beliefs derived from Sciacca’s teachings, which Jesuits understood Sciacca’s disciples had brought from “Cengicco” to Japan through China. Similarities between Japanese and Christian customs were explicitly highlighted by Lancillotto in the third edition of his report, which mentions, for example, the presence of religious orders, evening prayers summoned by bells, the use of the rosary, iconoclasm, the concepts of hell and heaven, and the worship of numerous saints who intercede with God on behalf of the faithful.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, when Francis Xavier arrived in Japan in 1549, he had a preconceived idea of what Japanese beliefs consisted of –one which was informed both by what he had learned from Anjirō and by Christian worldviews. Xavier wrote to his brethren in Goa that he was generally pleased with Japanese laypeople because they did not worship animals but believed in their “men of old,” who had lived “like philosophers.” Most Japanese worshipped the sun and the moon, he admitted, but were governed by reason and if somebody explained their errors reasonably, they recognised them.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, according to Xavier, lay Japanese despised sinful monks, who were believed to practice sodomy. Xavier appears to have been aware of the divisions among Japanese monks, as he mentioned the acrimony between competing groups. However, he distinguished them only by the colour of their robes and made no reference to differences in beliefs or practices. Here, too, he

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18 Nicolao Lancillotto to Ignatius Loyola, Cochin, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1548, in *DI*, 1:443. The Armenian bishop has been identified by José Wicki as Mar Jacob *abuna*, bishop of the Syro-Malabar Church (*DI*, 1:443 n. 50). Cf. Schurhammer, “Three Letters of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Malabar 1503–1550”. *Orientalia*. Rome; Lisbon: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1963, pp.333–349.

19 Nicolao Lancillotto, “Información sobre Japón”, Cochin, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1548, in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.51–53; p.60.

20 *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.45–47.

21 Francis Xavier’s letter to the Jesuits of Goa, Kagoshima, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1549, in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.134–170. This was Xavier’s first letter from Japan and is analysed in App, “Francis Xavier’s Discovery of Japanese Buddhism. A Chapter in the European Discovery of Buddhism (Part 1: Before the Arrival in Japan, 1547–1549)”.

drew parallels with Europe, reporting that some monks dressed in brown, like friars, while others wore black robes, like clerics.<sup>22</sup>

### Not So Similar After All (1551)

Although the dearth of surviving letters written from Japan prevents us from attempting a detailed reconstruction of the first years of the Jesuit encounter with Buddhism, it appears that by the summer of 1551 Francis Xavier had become aware of the detrimental consequences of introducing Christianity on the basis of a supposed affinity with Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> The adoption of Buddhist terms to translate key Christian tenets into Japanese could irremediably compromise the theological significance of Christian terminology. Even the name of God, which up to that point had been translated with the name of the Buddha Mahāvairocana (Dainichi), had turned out to be a dangerous mistranslation.<sup>24</sup> This realisation prompted Xavier to entrust fellow Father Cosme de Torres and translator Brother Juan Fernández (1526–1567) with the task of interviewing Buddhist monks to set right the mistakes. The results of these interviews, the so-called “disputes of Yamaguchi,” were presented in two letters addressed to Xavier.

A comparison between these two epistolary texts brings to the surface the process by which the missionaries elaborated the information collected from their Japanese interlocutors.<sup>25</sup> The first letter, signed by Juan Fernández, is a summary of the notes he had taken earlier during the debates and records the trail of questions and answers between the missionaries and the monks.<sup>26</sup> The missionaries employed a maieutic method, asking questions with the primary objective of “making the interlocutors understand” Christian belief.<sup>27</sup> Thus, collecting information on Buddhism seems to have been, at least initially, a secondary target, subordinated to the confutation of Buddhism and the demonstration of the rational superiority of Christianity.

A good example is the discussion on the concept of “saint” as somebody who had pursued a path of salvation. It can be inferred from the answers the missionaries received that Fernández used the word “saint” (*sancto*) to translate *hotoke* (buddhas),

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22 *Documentos*, vol. 1, p.146.

23 Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier*, vol. 4, pp.223–225.

24 The traditional retelling of the events surrounding the use of the name Dainichi can be found in *Ibidem*, pp.225–26. See also Luís de Almeida to the Jesuits of Europe, Yokoseura, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1562, in *Documentos*, vol. 2 (1558–1562). Juan Ruiz-de-Medina, S.J. (Ed.). Roma: Instituto Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús, 1995, p.547.

25 On the more philosophical aspects of the Yamaguchi disputes, see Rubiés, “Real and Imaginary Dialogues in the Jesuit Mission of Sixteenth-century Japan”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* vol. 55 (2012), pp.474–482.

26 Juan Fernández to Francis Xavier, Yamaguchi, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1551, in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.238–261.

27 *Ibidem*, p.242 (see also p.242, n.13).

not realizing the fundamental difference between the two concepts.<sup>28</sup> The Jesuits had singled out this notion of “saint” as central to Japanese religion and translated the Japanese term for Buddhism, *buppō* (lit. “the law of the Buddha”), as “the law that produced saints.” Thus, their inquiry began with this idea, in an attempt to discover a corresponding theology of salvation. However, the first Buddhists they questioned, a group of monks and laypeople affiliated to the Zen school (“jenxus,” i.e., *zenshū*), dramatically overturned the Jesuit understanding of local religious practices. These Buddhists seem to reject the very existence of a saint and the necessity of following a holy lifestyle, for, they argued, “what comes from nothing necessarily returns to nothing.” This stance paved the way for a long philosophical debate through which the Jesuits understood that there was more to Buddhism than what they had assumed.<sup>29</sup>

The Yamaguchi disputes were dominated by Zen interpretations of Buddhism, and this can be attributed to various factors. Zen monks were the first and most numerous group to visit the missionaries.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, Zen tenets simply appeared as the most alien to Jesuits. Therefore, not only did such tenets attract more questions, they also had to be described in detail to Xavier –who, as head of the entire Asia mission, had the final say on the policies to be implemented in Japan. Other Buddhist schools are mentioned in the records of the debates, but it appears that these initially attracted less interest from the Jesuits. Fernández spoke of two other groups, which he associated to specific Buddhas: the first group consisted of “worshippers of Śākyamuni [Xacha],” while the second comprised the followers of “the law of Amitābha [Amida] and other Buddhas.”<sup>31</sup> While Śākyamuni had already been mentioned in Lancillotto’s letter, this is the first Jesuit source that refers to the Buddha Amitābha.<sup>32</sup>

The other document that recounts the Yamaguchi disputes, a short letter by Cosme de Torres, provides more information on the structure of Japanese

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28 *Documentos*, vol. 1, p.242, n.10. See also App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, p.25.

29 *Ibidem*, p.25. See also *Documentos*, vol. 1, p.242.

30 *Ibidem*.

31 Fernández writes “y así venieron otros de la ley de Amida y otros foquexus.” The word “foquexus” indicates members of Hokkeshū and it is interpreted in this sense by the editor of the letter in *Documentos*, vol. 1, p.257, n.29. However, here it must be just a mistake for “fotoques” (*hotoke*).

32 Śākyamuni is described here in much more detail than Amida. He is identified as the perpetrator of a “Great Lie”, a feature that would repeatedly appear in Jesuit descriptions of this Buddha. Urs App discusses it as a “unique biographical invention”: the Jesuits in fact thought that “at the age of forty-one the Buddha suddenly rejected all of his earlier writings and doctrines and subsequently exclusively taught meditation – a change of opinion that the Jesuits denounced as a lie.” App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, p.32.



Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> Torres does not identify Buddhism as a single entity, but describes it as “many manners of idolatry,” subdivided by their object of worship. Torres calls the latter “idol,” abandoning the use of the term “saint” to refer to the buddhas. Śākyamuni is presented as the most important idol. His devotees are in turn divided into two groups: those who worship him exclusively, called *faquexu* (Hokkeshū, i.e., the modern Nichiren school), and those who also worship other “idols”. In addition, the Buddha Amida is given a prominent place in this document. According to Torres, his worshippers were the most numerous Buddhist group in Japan, and the reason for this was that they were offered an easy path to salvation which even evil people could follow: in order to be saved it was sufficient to call out the name of Amida, “Amidabud” (*Namu Amida Butsu*) with a firm heart before death. Torres divides this group, too, into those who worship solely Amida, called *icoxo* (Jp. Ikkōshū, i.e., the modern Jōdo shinshū), and those who also worship other Buddhas. Torres describes a third group of believers as the worshippers of sun and moon. This group reportedly regards the sun and the moon as gods, but it is also said to worship everything in existence, including the devil. Its members are depicted as ignorant and gullible, because of their many “silly beliefs”. It is not clear to what kind of devotees this category corresponded in the Japanese religious landscape of the time. It is probably a reference to the various *kami* cults that are today included in the rubric of Shinto. Interestingly, this category of believers is presented as a separate group, but within Buddhism – a perspective that will be maintained, by and large, in later documents.

Albeit short, Torres’ letter is the first and hitherto most complex attempt to map out the world of Japanese Buddhism for a general audience. Torres organised Japanese Buddhism according to a principle that had been used by European missionaries and travellers alike in previous centuries: the object of worship. This was the main criterion used for evaluating other religions in other areas of Jesuit presence, such as Goa. The object of worship was also a marker of sectarian identity within Japanese Buddhism and thus to focus on it should have helped the Jesuits understand the configuration of the Buddhist world. Yet the Jesuit reckoned that this classification was not sufficient to address the diversity of Buddhism in Japan. For instance, it could not be applied to the Zen school, which denied worshipping any Buddha. Zen was perceived as too popular a school among the elites to be simply ignored. Thus, Torres created a hybrid classification system, bringing doctrinal tenets to bear upon the taxonomy of this last group of Buddhists. He divided Zen followers in three further types, according to their belief in a so-called “soul”.<sup>34</sup> The first type believed that there is no soul, as they upheld the view that “what comes from nothing returns to it”; the second believed that souls are ever-existing

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33 Cosme de Torres to the Jesuits in Goa, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1551, in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.206–218.

34 *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.214–215. See also App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, p.24.

and return to where they came from after death; the third maintained that souls enter other bodies after death. The most difficult type to convert, according to Torres, was the first, for it consisted of “men of great meditations” who required educated missionaries to confront and convince them.

Buddhist doctrine therefore assumed a place of importance it had not held in previous discussions of other Asian religions. The centrality ascribed to the concept of soul in the description of Zen undoubtedly reflected the significance this topic had in Christian theology, rather than for Zen believers. The attention missionaries gave to presumed internal divisions within the Zen school regarding the interpretation of the soul also attests that they saw Buddhism through the lenses of their own historical experience. In the post-Reformation climate, when divisions within European Christianity had prompted the Catholic Church to posit orthodoxy, uniformity and unity as crucial elements for the survival of religious institutions, rifts within the Buddhist world could be identified as potentially exploitable weaknesses. This depiction of Buddhism thus might have highlighted internal contradictions in the hope of reaching a breakthrough for the conversion of the Japanese country.

Despite the information he received while leaving Japan, Francis Xavier did not come to a definitive conclusion on the best way to describe Buddhism. Possibly perplexed by the unexpected complexity of Buddhism, Xavier repeatedly asked for some educated European missionaries to travel to Japan, with the intention of sending them to study in “Japanese universities.” Xavier hoped that the missionaries could “enroll” at monastic complexes, such as Mount Hiei and Mount Kōya, so that they would then engage authoritatively in disputes with the monks and convince them of the superiority of Christianity.<sup>35</sup> Xavier’s final letter to Europe shows that his main concern were the activities of Japanese monks and nuns.<sup>36</sup> His descriptions introduce a word that would later become the staple term to refer to Japanese Buddhist groups: sect (*seita*). In Europe, until the seventeenth century this term encompassed a broad range of meanings, such as “school of thought” and “way of life,” and did not necessarily have the negative connotations it would have at a later stage.<sup>37</sup> Xavier had arguably made a connection between Buddhist

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35 This plan was not carried out in the end; see D’Ortia, “Il ruolo delle ‘università’ nella strategia missionaria di Francesco Saverio per il Giappone”. *Revista Estudios*, vol. 32 (2016), pp.417–46.

36 Francis Xavier to the Brothers in Europe, Cochin, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1552, in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.290–317.

37 Cf. *seita*, in Cardoso, *Dictionarium latino lusitanicum, et lusitanico latinum*. Lisbon: Laurentij de Anveres, 1643, 333r. Cf. Menegon, “European and Chinese Controversies over Rituals: A Seventeenth-Century Genealogy of Chinese Religion”. Boute; Småberg (Ed.), *Devising Order. Socio-religious Models, Rituals, and the Performativity of Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 2013, p.197, n. 7. On the modern use of the word “sect” as applied to Buddhist schools, see McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp.11–12. It is interesting to note that the equivalent term for sect/school in Japanese, “shū”,

schools and the various Protestant denominations, which were more and more frequently called “sects” in Catholic Europe.

## The Refutation of Buddhism and the Language Reform (1551–1561)

An element that emerges from Xavier’s writings after he left Japan is that Buddhism is no longer understood to comprise lost traces of Christianity. In a letter from Cochin, Xavier expresses his perplexity:

“I tried to understand if these Amitābha [Ameda] and Śākyamuni [Xaca] were human philosophers. I asked the [Japanese] Christians to collect faithfully [the facts of] their lives. I found out that, according to what is written in their books, they were not men, because they lived one thousand and two thousand years, and Śākyamuni was born eight thousand times. Thus, they cannot have been men, but pure inventions of the devils. For the love and service of our Lord, I beg all who read these letters to pray to God to give us victory against these devils, Śākyamuni and Amitābha, and all the other [devils].”<sup>38</sup>

In regarding the Buddhas as a creation of the devil Xavier took the Jesuit interpretation beyond a simple equivalence between Buddhism and some kind of degenerated Christianity. His judgement condemned Buddhism, making its denunciation a moral obligation for missionaries. This position had a profound influence on Jesuits’ attitudes in the years to come.

It was based on this new approach that Baltazar Gago, who stayed in Japan from 1552 to 1559, fashioned his own analysis. In a letter written in 1555, Gago argues that the initial confusion between Christianity and Buddhism was due to an erroneous translation of key theological terms. If Xavier had identified the problem with God’s name, Gago expanded it to the whole evangelisation vocabulary: “the devil [in Japan],” he wrote, “has sustenance from ten sects he brought from China.”<sup>39</sup>

In his account, Gago introduced a pivotal Buddhist tenet, the doctrine of skillful means (Jp. *hōben*). Gago does not seem to have grasped its meaning as the Buddha’s pedagogical tool to convey his teachings to a diverse audience. He translated the expression “fonben xet” (*hōben setsu*, i.e. the theory of skillfull means) as “all these [Buddhist practices] are a lie,” probably drawing on the primary meaning of *hōben*

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was used as early as the thirteenth century to indicate Buddhist denominations when making comprehensive presentations of Japanese Buddhism. This is attested in *Hasshū kōyō* (Essentials of the Eight Schools, 1268), a primer of Japanese Buddhist history.

- 38 Francis Xavier to the Brothers in Europe, Cochin, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1552, in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.307–308.
- 39 Baltasar Gago to the Jesuits of India and Portugal, Hirado, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1555, *Ibidem*, p.564.

as 'lie'.<sup>40</sup> Using this idea, Gago organised Japanese devotees into two groups: those who were deceived by this lie, and those who were not.<sup>41</sup> He also seems to have taken the expression "fonben xet" as a formula used in ritual, and argued that the Buddhists who are misled by this illusion end their rituals by saying "fonben xet". Yet they do not comprehend the real meaning of the phrase, that is, that every Buddhist teaching is a fabrication. Thus they continue to engage in devotions, believe in hell and heaven, pray by reading books, and enter religious orders, but these actions produce no results. The second group of Buddhist followers, mostly comprised of monks and noblemen, on the contrary appears not to be deceived by Buddhist tales, for they refute the existence of a creator, of the soul, and of the devil. Instead of publicly admitting that the teachings of their gods are false, however, these Buddhists avoid performing any rituals and spend their time meditating.

This approach bears similarities to that of the *Sumario de los Errores* ("Summary of Errors," completed by 1556), suggesting that Gago was involved in the compilation of this fundamental text which would guide the Jesuits' assessment of Buddhism until the beginning of the 1580s.<sup>42</sup> By tracing the origins of Christianity and Buddhism to different sources – the former coming from God, the latter from the devil – the *Sumario* ratified a move from the attempt to use Buddhism to introduce Christianity to its outright rejection. The *Sumario* also attests that Jesuits were now comfortable with considering Buddhism as a distinct body of teachings, rather than a scattered expression of religiosity. The *Sumario* characterises Buddhism as a "gentile sect" and uses the Japanese term *buppō* (spelled as *bupoo*) to speak about it.<sup>43</sup> This religious body is, in turn, subdivided into "eight or nine sects," according to different criteria – a clear borrowing from standard presentations of Buddhism as consisting of eight or ten schools, which circulated in Japan since the thirteenth century.<sup>44</sup> Although the term *buppō* does not appear in the subsequent documents considered for this article, which tend to speak of "kami and hotoke," the Jesuits maintained an awareness of the meaning of this word as the "doctrine of the buddhas."<sup>45</sup> It is the *Sumario* that introduces the term "Fotoqui" or "Fotoque"

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40 For an introduction to the concept of *hōben*, see Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*. London; New York: Routledge, 2003.

41 A Japanese convert, Paulo Chōzen, helped Gago to formulate this interpretation.

42 "Sumario de los errores" in *Documentos*, vol. 1, pp.652–668.

43 The *Sumario* mentions another "gentile sect", whose followers "worship twenty idols, which they call kami (camins)", and which includes a subsect "which in Japan is called the 'Law of the Devil'; its members are called Iamambuxos (Yamabushi) [...] they follow the sect of the kami most literally." (*Documentos*, vol. 1, p.655; p.659). The *Sumario* is somehow unusual in presenting the followers of the kami as a separate group from the Buddhists.

44 *Ibidem*, p.659. For a Japanese outline of Buddhism as composed of eight schools, see n. 37.

45 The Jesuit dictionary *Vocabulario da lingoa de Japam* (Nagasaki, 1603) includes the term with this sense: the entry "Buppō, Fotoqeno nori" is translated as "Laws, or doctrine of the hotoke."

(Buddha). Albeit translated as “redemptor” (Redeemer), this term was compellingly defined as “the matter of the four elements.”<sup>46</sup>

The *Sumario* argues that “the sect [dedicated to] contemplation is not the only one which says that there is nothing more than to be born and to die: all the other sects, even if they preach and pray to the buddhas [fotoques] to be saved, in their midst [have] sages [who] believe that there is nothing.”<sup>47</sup> The *Sumario* thus concludes that Buddhism revolves primarily around two strands: one is to identify a Buddha as the object of worship and to pray for salvation; the other is to believe that nothingness is the underlying principle of reality. The *Sumario* connects the latter strand with a specific type of devotees: defined as “philosophers,” they represent an elite group found in every sect, whose beliefs are described as the “inner” feature of Buddhism.<sup>48</sup> The remaining believers, who worship various buddhas and perform salvation rituals, comprise the “outer” side of Buddhism. The greater attention that Jesuits paid to the “inner” aspect of Buddhism is symptomatic of the importance they accorded to the conversion of the monastic and political elites, as they had identified the “inner” beliefs with those of the upper classes. Jesuit plans for the evangelisation of Japan strove to implement a top-down approach: to evangelise the elites first and then convert the people of their lands through mass baptism. This approach was justified by arguing that it followed the rigid hierarchy of Japanese society.<sup>49</sup>

The arrival of Vice-Provincial Melchior Nunes Barreto (c.1520–1571) in 1556 initiated a new reform period. Barreto perceived the identification of Christianity with Buddhism as a mutual misunderstanding. If Jesuits had used Buddhist vocabulary to refer to Christian concepts, Japanese monks had aggravated the situation by identifying various elements of Christianity with their Buddhist equivalents, then declaring them to be skilful means used by the Buddhas.<sup>50</sup> To avoid corrupting the evangelisation process further, Barreto replaced the fifty-odd Buddhist terms that missionaries had until then used with Portuguese or Latin words.<sup>51</sup> The reformed terms were presented in a new catechism called *Nijūgo Kajō* (Treaty of the Twenty-five Instructions), now lost.<sup>52</sup> A perusal of Barreto’s letters reveals a

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46 *Documentos*, vol. 1, p.660; 667.

47 *Ibidem*, p.666.

48 *Ibidem*, pp.666–667.

49 See López-Gay, *El Catecumenado en la Mision del Japon del s. XVI*. Roma: Libreria Dell’universita’ Gregoriana, 1966, pp.94–96.

50 Melchior Nunes Barreto to Diego Láinez, Cochin, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1558, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, pp.109–110.

51 Examples include *anima* instead of *tamaxe*, or *deusu* instead of *fotoque* (Bourdon, *La Compagnie*, pp.269–270).

52 *Ibidem*, p.311. Following the transcription of the mission’s interpreter and historian, João Rodrigues (c. 1561–1633) (n.187), we understand Barreto’s work was called *Nijūgo Kajō*, rather than *Nijūgo Kagyō*, as Bourdon has it.

more articulated knowledge of Buddhist tenets. For example, he shows to be aware of the central Buddhist concept of attachment:

“Hell is [according to the Japanese] the worm of conscience that besets and afflicts men who persist in their ignorance, believing that there is something after this life. They truly enter paradise [and are] blessed in this life, once they become firmly persuaded that there is nothing after this life and the pain of their conscience is extinguished. And for as many loathsome crimes they commit, they do not fear any judge after death.”<sup>53</sup>

Barreto is clearly influenced by his education in describing the Buddhist hell as “worm of conscience” – a specific Christian expression, used in Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, Barreto found a social justification for the two layers of truth, which during his time had become the main feature of Buddhism in Jesuit descriptions.<sup>55</sup> He postulated that “outer” beliefs were used by monks to keep the lower strata of society under the control of the political authorities. An assorted group of monks and noblemen maintained this deceit, refusing to share their “inner” truth with the populace at large.<sup>56</sup>

## Perspectives from the Capital

At the end of 1559 a mission was established in Miyako (Kyōto) by Gaspar Vilela (1526–1572).<sup>57</sup> The Portuguese father was helped by a Japanese brother, Lourenço of Hirado (c.1525–1592), who was to act as Vilela’s interpreter, and by a *dōjuku* (auxiliary) called Damião (c.1536–1586).<sup>58</sup> The establishment of this house created a second major Jesuit centre in Japan. The Miyako mission, however, operated in a slightly different manner from its Kyūshū counterpart.

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53 *Documentos*, vol. 2, p.110.

54 In Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, “worm of conscience” refers to one of the bitter things the believer is to taste in the Meditation on Hell (5<sup>th</sup> exercise, 4<sup>th</sup> point).

55 See, for example, the description in Cosme de Torres to Antonio de Quadros, Funai, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1561, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, p.452.

56 Melchior Nunes Barreto to Diego Laínez, Cochin, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1558, in *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p.109. Although Barreto elaborates on the “followers of the sect of meditations” (*Ibidem*, p. 111), there is no substantial implication later in the text that the “inner” teaching is exclusive to the Zen school, as Urs App instead suggests (App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, pp.41–42).

57 Francis Xavier had travelled to Miyako in 1550, but had not remained long in the capital, apparently disappointed by the state of disrepair in which the city had fallen.

58 On Lourenço, see Ebisawa, “Irmão Lourenço, the First Japanese Lay-Brother of the Society of Jesus and his Letter”. *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1942), pp.225–233.

Problems affecting the Miyako mission included the lack of economic resources, the isolation in which the missionaries worked, and the chaotic political context in which it operated. These circumstances contributed to the instability of the enterprise, but at the same time facilitated, and in some cases even forced, a wider experimentation with evangelisation methods and a more attentive observation of Japanese culture and religious practices.<sup>59</sup> The strong Japanese presence in the Jesuit house made missionaries more aware of the demands of Japanese culture. The court's proximity also pressured them to follow local customs, such as visiting the authorities on the first days of the New Year (*shōgatsu*).<sup>60</sup> However, missionaries were also more subject to the control of city authorities and sources mention direct interventions by officials in their proselytization efforts.<sup>61</sup> Due to the prestige of being in the capital, the Miyako mission would take on an increasingly important role over time, despite the fact that the headquarters did not always endorse the direction it took. By 1580, even though most Christians lived in the south, the Miyako house had become the most important Jesuit establishment in Japan.<sup>62</sup>

Overall, the information supplied by sources from Miyako reflects different experiences and needs. Writing in June 1560, Lourenço spoke of the difficulties met while establishing the Jesuit mission in the capital, but demonstrated an optimistic attitude in the light of the notable converts the missionaries had won.<sup>63</sup> He reported that, after antagonising the Jesuits, Buddhist monks started claiming that “what [the Jesuits] preached was the foundation of their own teaching;” the Shingon school associated the Christian God and Christian teachings with Dainichi Nyorai, the Zen school with the workings of *hōben*, and the Nichiren school with the teachings of the *Lotus sutra*. Thus Lourenço suggested that the Buddhists

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59 Ribeiro, “Gaspar Vilela. Between Kyūshū and the Kinai”. *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies*, vol. 15 (2007), p.22.

60 Fróis, *Historia de Japam*. vol. 2. José Wicki (Ed.). Lisboa: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, 1981, p.13.

61 One such episode occurred in 1585, when the Emperor enquired on the reasons that led an old and respected physician from the capital, whose name appears in the sources as Dosam, to convert to a religion that condemned the *kami* as devils. Dosam is reported to have diplomatically maintained that he had never heard of such teachings, but privately he advised the Christian preachers to avoid explicit denunciations of deities that were considered to be the forefathers of Japanese nobility. Letter from Luis Fróis to the General in *Cartas que os Padres e Irmãos da Companhia de Jesus escreveram dos Reynos de Japão & China aos da mesma Companhia da India & Europa desde anno de 1549 até o de 1580*. Em Evora por Manoel de Lyra, Anno de MDXCVIII [1598], vol. 2, pp.157r–159r (henceforth: *Cartas*).

62 *DI*, vol. 13, p.209. This is also suggested in Valignano's *Sumario de las cosas de Japón (1583)*. *Adiciones del Sumario (1592)*. José Luis Alvarez-Taladriz (Ed.). Tōkyō: Sophia University, 1954, vol. 1, pp.162–169.

63 Lourenço of Hirado to the Jesuits in Funai, Miyako, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1560, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, pp.263–278.

incorporate Christianity into their doctrinal framework, giving details than previous Jesuits had omitted.<sup>64</sup> Unlike Barreto, Lourenço was not concerned with such strategy. He expressed hope that in so doing Buddhist monks would eventually recognise the Catholic truth.<sup>65</sup> Lourenço's relaxed attitude clearly does not reflect the stance that the Jesuit headquarters in Kyūshū had taken towards Buddhism.

The Jesuit presence in Miyako afforded the missionaries a different perspective on Japanese Buddhism as a whole. To start with, they acknowledged the central role that the great Buddhist complexes of the Kinai region played in the power dynamics of the country, as we shall analyse further. Secondly, the frequent journeys between the capital and Sakai that Vilela and his group undertook for safety reasons allowed them to come into contact with different Buddhist practices than those they had witnessed in Kyūshū. They recorded these practices with interest and tried to understand their background. For instance, Vilela wrote about the death rituals of each Buddhist school and their related beliefs regarding the afterlife.<sup>66</sup> He also understood that Buddhist schools were organised into lineages and described their founders (Kōbō Daishi, Nichiren, Kakuban) as the distinctive elements of each lineage. We shall examine some examples in more detail shortly.

During the 1570s the Japanese mission found itself in a complex situation, as rapid conversion growth did not correspond to an increase in the number of missionaries or funds.<sup>67</sup> The new Superior, Francisco Cabral (1533–1609), spent the first years of his term dealing with internal organisation problems, as he was concerned that the mission had strayed from what he considered to be Jesuit orthopraxis. Cabral's Eurocentric approach had an impact on the perception of Buddhism. He was reluctant to recognise Buddhism as an independent religion and assimilated Japanese beliefs to the thought of Classical philosophers, in particular Aristotle's. Accordingly, he suggested that missionaries only needed to read the commentaries on *De Fisica* to be able to refute the Buddhists.<sup>68</sup> From Goa he requested books by the Fathers of the Church, who had already dismantled ideas

64 Josephson echoes such claim arguing that Japanese Buddhists dealt with Christianity as they had done with religious difference, that is, by organising it under a totalling framework that he calls 'hierarchical inclusion.' (*The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp.24–28.)

65 *Documentos*, vol. 2, pp.274–275. According to Ruiz-de-Medina, Lourenço is being ironic in this passage.

66 Gaspar Vilela to António de Quadros and the Jesuits in India, Sakai, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1561, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, pp.356–358; and Gaspar Vilela to António de Quadros and the Jesuits in India, Sakai, September 1562, *Ibidem*, pp.513–14.

67 The number of missionaries in Japan during these years is documented in Costa, *O Cristianismo no Japão e o Bispado de D. Luís Cerqueira*. PhD in History, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (NOVA FCSH), 1998. vol. 1, p.646 (Table 13).

68 Valignano, *Sumario de las cosas de Japon (1583)*. *Adiciones del Sumario del Japon (1592)*. vol. I. 140\*.



similar to those of the Buddhists and could therefore be effectively used to the same effect against Buddhism. On other occasions, however, Cabral compared some Buddhist groups to Lutheran Christianity, anticipating the assessment of later interpreters:

“The Ikkō [Jcoxus] are a sect similar to that of Luther in Europe, and they believe that the only thing necessary to be saved is to call the name of Amida [Amuda]. Therefore, nobody can be saved by their good works, nor if they vituperate Amida, whose merits are the only thing that saves them.”<sup>69</sup>

Part of the information conveyed in Cabral’s epistles comes from the interactions with Buddhist monks which were possible in the capital. An important informant of the Jesuits in the years 1570–71 was a former Buddhist monk called Kenzen João, a learned cleric from Hakata who is said to have previously been the “rector of a monastery.”<sup>70</sup> Cabral had taken him to the Miyako mission, where he spent a year reading “Buddhist books” to the missionaries and thus greatly expanding their knowledge of Buddhist doctrines and practice. Cabral writes of him:

“He read us some books of the laws of Japan and helped us writing a book in which not only the mysteries of our Holy Faith are declared, but the laws of Japan are also disproved and their falsities shown; he helped us much in this, because he knew all their secrets.”<sup>71</sup>

It appears that this informant was not the only Buddhist monk at the Miyako house. In 1574, Fathers Luís Fróis and Organtino Gneccchi-Soldo (1532–1609),<sup>72</sup> Vilela’s successors, hired a former monk of the Nichiren school to read them the *Lotus sutra*.<sup>73</sup> Thus Buddhist monks were instrumental in building Jesuits’ appreciation of Buddhist teachings, although Jesuits eventually used it to rebuke Buddhism.

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69 Francisco Cabral to the General, Kuchinotsu, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1571, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (henceforth: ARSI), Jap. Sin. 7-II, 30r. Comparative analyses of True Pure Land Buddhism and Protestant Christianity, including comparisons of the fathers of the school, Shinran or Rennyō, and Luther, have continued in modern scholarship. See, for instance, Blum; Yasutomi (Ed.), *Rennyō and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

70 Alvarez-Taladriz’s transcription of Cabral’s “quijen” (Valignano, *Sumario*, 139\*). Kenzen João had been the spiritual leader of his hometown, Hakata, where he was in charge of baptisms. It often happened that Buddhist monks who converted to Christianity retained religious leadership of their communities, and offered their old temple to be used as a church (see, for example, Joaquin’s case in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.353v.)

71 Cabral to the General, Miyako, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1574, ARSI, Jap.Sin. 7-II, 209r.

72 On Organtino, see Malena, “I gesuiti italiani missionari in Giappone nel ‘secolo cristiano’”. *Il Giappone* vol. 35 (1995), pp.21–22.

73 Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, vol. 2 (1981), pp.408–409.

Cabral, for instance, arguably used the information collected during the Buddhist reading sessions for his refutation of Buddhist doctrines.

Overall, Jesuit depictions of Buddhism from the years 1570–1579 seem to focus on rituals, institutions, and other tangible elements of Buddhism. This is indicative not only of a shift in the interests of various missionaries, but also of the broadening of Jesuit horizons after the foundation of the Miyako mission. We shall present a few representative cases below.

## Buddhism as the Religion of *Kami* and *Hotoke*

Alessandro Valignano, the Society's Visitor (General Inspector) of the East Indies, arrived in Japan in 1579.<sup>74</sup> Valignano engaged extensively with Buddhism, although he implemented no major changes to the patterns of analysis established before him.<sup>75</sup> He was committed to reorganizing the Asian missions and restructuring their missionary policies, which enabled him to produce a more comprehensive discourse on Buddhism than his predecessors. The breadth and strength of his analysis can be appreciated in four of his substantial works: *Catechismus christianae fidei* (1586; henceforth *Catechismus*); *Advertimentos e Avisos acerca dos costumes e catangues de Jappão*, (1581; better known as *Cerimoniale*); *Sumario de las cosas de Japón* (1583; henceforth *Sumario*); and *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias orientales* (1583, *Principio*).<sup>76</sup> Valignano never minced his words regarding the evil nature of Buddhism and its sinful origins. In *Principio*, for instance, he presented Japanese religion as the “creation of a perverse

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74 For an introduction to the figure of Valignano and his impact on the Jesuit missions in Asia, see Üçerler, “Alessandro Valignano, Man, Missionary, and Writer”. *Renaissance Studies* vol. 17, no. 3 (September 2003), pp.337–366; and *Alessandro Valignano S.I., Uomo del Rinascimento: Ponte tra Oriente e Occidente*. Tamburello; Üçerler; Di Russo (Ed.). Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2008. Moran offers a good presentation of his work in Japan in *The Japanese and the Jesuits. Alessandro Valignano in sixteenth-century Japan*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993.

75 See, for example, Alvarez-Taladriz's comments (*Sumario*, 139\*-43\*) on how Valignano reused Cabral's lost catechism in his *Catechismus*.

76 The critical editions and translations used here are: Valignano, *Catecismo da Fé Cristã, no qual se mostra a verdade da nossa santa religião e se refutam as seitas japonesas*. António Guimarães Pinto (Tradução do Latim); António Guimarães Pinto and José Miguel Pinto dos Santos (Introdução); José Miguel Pinto dos Santos (Anotações). Lisboa: Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau; Fundação Jorge Álvares, 2017; *Il cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*. Josef Franz Schütte, S.J. (Ed.). Nuova edizione anastatica con saggio introduttivo do Michaela Catto. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011; *Sumario de las cosas de Japón: 1583. Adiciones del Sumario 1592 and Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias orientales (1542–64)*. Josef Wicki (Ed.). Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1944.

man,” a set of contradictory doctrines which confused the Buddhists themselves.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, however, he acknowledged the social role that Buddhism played in Japan, as we shall see in later sections.

In *Principio* Valignano reorganised previous interpretations and further elaborated on a number of points. He divided Buddhist followers into those who believed in hell and heaven and those who did not, thus adopting a criterion that dates back to the 1550s *Sumario de los errores*. He argued that the first group believed in many saintly beings called *hotoke*, as well as in a kind of paradise and in six hells, whereas the other group did not uphold such beliefs because they had reached *satori* and therefore had realised the truth and perfection of the Buddha.<sup>78</sup> These enlightened faithful, however, also believed that the other group of followers would be repeatedly reborn in different hells as human beings or animals, until they too returned to an original status that Valignano indicates as “first principle.” Valignano noted that each Buddhist school called this principle by different names, such as Amida, Śākyamuni, or Mahāvairocana, but these basically addressed the same principle.<sup>79</sup> Echoing Gago, Valignano maintained that those followers who aimed at *satori* were the literati of all Buddhist schools and the members of the Zen sect.<sup>80</sup>

With an eye to the European readership of his writings, Valignano returned to the relation between Buddhism and Lutheranism and argued that since the Japanese did not believe in good deeds, they followed “the same doctrine that the devil, father to both, taught to Luther.” In doing so, Valignano applied a rhetorical strategy that depicted the enemy in Asia as the enemy at home – a strategy that would continue to be used by both Protestant and Catholic writers against each other in later descriptions of Asian religions:

“From this [similarity] the wretched heretics of our time [i.e., the Lutherans] could take the opportunity to recognise their blindness; [...] it would be enough for them to know that their own doctrine was given by the devil, through his ministers, to the gentility of Japan, simply changing the name of the person they believe in and wait for. Through this, the devil obtains the same result among the heretics and the gentiles, because both are deeply involved in carnality and error, divided into many sects and, for this reason, living in great confusion about what they believe and in continuous wars.”<sup>81</sup>

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77 See, for example, *Catechismus*, pp.125–28.

78 “Through *satori*, they finally manage to open their understanding, and to know the perfection and truth of their [first] principle, [and this is] the glory and accomplished virtue of the *hotoke*.” (*Principio*, p.159).

79 *Ibidem*.

80 “But the literati, [who are those] who know more in these sects and who follow the interior of their laws, in which they believe, and those who belong to the Zen sect, commonly settle for saying that there is no heaven nor hell in the other world.” (*Principio*, pp.158–159).

81 *Ibidem*, p.161. For later identifications of Japanese Buddhism with Catholicism by writers from Protestant cultures see Dolce, “Icons, scriptures, and their ritual

The most significant innovations of Valignano's depiction of Buddhism are lexical. Firstly, it is noteworthy that both *Sumario* and *Principio* frequently use the word "religion" to speak of the beliefs of the Japanese, in a sense closer to the modern meaning of the term, rather than the more common sixteenth-century meaning of "religious order". Valignano also borrowed words from Christian theology to describe Buddhism: for example, he used the term "doctrine" (*doutrina*), which up to that point had been reserved almost exclusively for Christianity.<sup>82</sup> These lexical changes hint to a more rounded appreciation of Buddhism as a religious entity having the same complexity of Christianity.

Secondly, Valignano introduced Japanese deities to European audiences as "gods" (*dioses*), avoiding the term hitherto commonly used for Asian deities, *pagodes*, of South Asian provenance:

"They have primarily two manners of gods: ones called kami [càmys], and others called *hotoke* [fotoqués] [...] Of the latter they tell such impossible, dirty, and ridicule stories, like always were the stories of the gods of the Gentiles."<sup>83</sup>

The use of the term "gods" had repercussions beyond the lexical innovation. As a Renaissance man, Valignano reflected the period's interest in the deities of chronologically and geographically distant cultures, which were placed in the same category as the gods of the Gentiles for their multitude and unusual features. An example of this understanding is the first manual of "idols," published in 1556 in Venice by Vincenzo Cartari (c.1502–1569). Titled *Le Imagini de i Dei de gli Antichi*, it included Greek and Roman gods as well as more exotic deities worshipped in the East (Egyptian gods) and the North of Europe (the gods of the Celts and the Germans). A subsequent edition published in 1615 would add a rubric for "the gods of the Indies". These comprised deities from both the Americas and the Indian sub-continent, the latter extending to East Asia and mainly featuring Japanese Buddhist deities.<sup>84</sup>

Valignano understood Buddhist deities to encompass *kami*, that is, the gods we today consider part of Shinto, and *hotoke*, literally 'buddhas', but in fact a term embracing discrete figures of the Buddhist pantheon. Valignano was aware of the differences between the two kinds of deities. For instance, he pointed out that *kami* were born locally, while *hotoke* were a later import from Siam through China.<sup>85</sup> More

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use: reflections on nineteenth-century European understandings of Japanese Buddhism", *La rencontre du Japon et de l'Europe: Images d'une découverte*, Paris: Publication Orientalistes de France, 2006, pp.57–78.

82 Exceptions were sporadic mentions in letters by Fróis and Barreto.

83 *Principio*, p.154. An extensive and detailed interpretation of the creation of *kami* and *hotoke* is found in the eighth lesson of the *Catechismus*, where Valignano speaks of the legends created by mankind after the Fall. See *Catechismus*, especially pp.125–128.

84 Frank, *Le panthéon du Japon*. Paris: Collège de France; Institut des Hautes Études Japonaises, 2017, pp.14–15.

85 *Principio*, p.155.

discerning than any previous Jesuit interpreter, he articulates the relation between these two types of gods in compelling ways:

This doctrine of Śākyamuni [Xāca] was initially received in China, and then it came to Japan in a time when Japanese people cared little about the things of the afterlife because they did not know any gods except for the kami, to whom they only asked favours for this world. Since [Śākyamuni's doctrine] had been received among the literati of China (whom the Japanese hold in high esteem), and exteriorly it appeared a good and reasonable thing, it was accepted among Japanese people easily. But because [the Japanese] were attached to their kami [camis], and the monks only wanted to win over the Japanese, not only did they not push the Japanese to abandon the kami, but actually, having such a good occasion to obtain what they wanted, they unified the buddhas [fotoquès] and the kami [...].<sup>86</sup>

This is a remarkable explanation of the symbiotic relation *kami* entertained with buddhas, which highlights important features of the combinatory system developed in Japan. Valignano attests that rituals to the *kami* concerned worldly benefits, while Buddhism offered solace for the afterlife. He also points out that different factors had contributed to the success of Buddhism, despite being a foreign religion: its integration with local cults; the needs of the people; the authority of Chinese culture, which Buddhism had brought with it; and the rationality of the Japanese, who were able (like Christians) to discern right from wrong. Valignano depicts the success of Buddhism as a deceit, claiming that Buddhist monks knew that neither heaven nor hell actually existed and propagated these beliefs only to captivate their audiences. It is noteworthy that Valignano describes the “unification” of the two types of deities as a Buddhist undertaking and the ultimate ruse to trick people. This would become a recurring argument in the writings of Christian visitors to Japan up to the nineteenth century.<sup>87</sup>

The notion of inner belief and outer teachings which is intimated in Valignano's description of the interaction between *kami* and buddhas also merits attention, as it would become a key element in the Jesuits' strategic assessment of Buddhism. Valignano discussed it in *Catechismus*, a handbook designed as a teaching tool for Jesuit Seminaries, which although focused on the refutation of Buddhism and the exposition of Christian tenets, it also elaborated on Buddhist teachings. The first *Catechismus* lesson is dedicated to Buddhism's “inner beliefs,” which Valignano

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86 Ibidem, pp.159–160.

87 William Griffis, for instance, would dedicate a chapter of his history of Japanese Buddhism to the combination of *kami* and buddhas, and would maintain that this was a development of Buddhism specific to Japan, which originated with the tricks of a Buddhist monk, Kōbō Daishi. Griffis, *The Religions of Japan from the Dawn of History to the Era of Meiji*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895, and Dolce, “Duality and the Kami: Reconfiguring Buddhist Notions and Ritual Patterns”. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* vol. 16 (2009), pp.119–150.

identifies in four tenets: (1) There is a first principle for everything; (2) This principle is present in all things; (3) This principle is of the same nature as that of human hearts, which merge into it after death; (4) The state of complete tranquility which characterises this principle can be attained by human beings through meditation, but until this happens they are forced to move constantly from one hell to the other.<sup>88</sup> Valignano considers the “outer teachings” of Buddhism too fanciful to deserve a proper rebuttal.<sup>89</sup> Yet these teachings receive some coverage in the *Catechismus*' fourth lesson. Here it is argued that *kami* and *hotoke* exist; that salvation consists of becoming a Buddha; and that people exist in different states according to their merits until they follow the laws of Śākyamuni and Amitābha and are thus granted salvation.<sup>90</sup> Once again, this explication shows a remarkable degree of understanding of Buddhist doctrines and practices.

Valignano's writings represent a pinnacle in the Jesuit mission's efforts to systematise Buddhism throughout the sixteenth century. While he built on interpretations that missionaries had advanced before his arrival, his openness towards Japanese culture and his skills as both an organiser and a communicator afforded him new insights into the nature of Japanese Buddhism. In particular, his understanding of Buddhism as a religion of its own helped reassess Buddhism as a distinct entity.

## The Institutional Power of Japanese Buddhism

As the Jesuit mission expanded over the Japanese territory and missionaries travelled more frequently outside Kyūshū, they learned about religious institutions and practices that were very different from anything they had seen in the south. The grand temple compounds of Mount Hiei and Mount Kōya impressed them with their size and the power, both spiritual and secular, their elders exuded. In his 1561 correspondence Torres called attention to the role of the *Zasu* (the head priest of Enryaku-ji, the headquarters of the Tendai school on Mount Hiei) whom Torres thought was the head of all Japanese Buddhists.<sup>91</sup> In 1562 Vilela sent to Europe detailed information on the Shingon establishment on Mount Kōya and its founder, Kūkai (774–835), known with the posthumous title of Kōbō Daishi:

[...] These monks, whom I mentioned, being like the knights of Rhodes, [...] live in many monasteries on a mountain range, and they must be more than 20,000 men. Their first principle was a man called Kōbō Daishi [Combondaxi], a *literato*, who,

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88 *Catechismus*, p.34.

89 *Ibidem*, p.75.

90 *Ibidem*, pp.77–78.

91 Cosme de Torres to António de Quadros, Funai, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1561, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, p.448.

according to the many things I heard, had a familiar [demonio familiar].<sup>92</sup> He invented a kind of alphabet that is widely used in Japan, called kana [Cana]. [...]. The law he left behind is called Shingon-shū [Xingojú].<sup>93</sup>

Vilela reported on the system of governance that characterised large monastic institutions in Japan, such as Enryaku-ji or the Shingon head temples, whereby the entire monastic community gathered in assemblies (*engi*) to deliberate on important issues that affected the monastery and voted when unanimity could not be reached. Writing of Negoro-ji, a major centre of Shingon Buddhism, Vilela explained:

They have no superior above themselves, the one who has more power becomes the leader when they gather in assembly. However, they grant some authority to their elders, according to their age. One of them has the same authority as all of them together on things that have to be decided [...], and many times they meet to discuss the same matter, until they reach a consensus.<sup>94</sup>

The self-determination of the monasteries must have made a favourable impression on the missionaries: Fróis would characterise those of the Kii peninsula as “great res publicae,” that is, independent states.<sup>95</sup>

It is significant that detailed information on Japanese religious institutions and practices was often requested from missionaries by their European audiences, and not only by the religious authorities on which the missions depended. European audiences were eager to know more about Japanese places and people. The Jesuits responded to this demand, turning it to their advantage. In fact, knowledge collected on the field also served propaganda purposes, for the greater the interest their narratives aroused in wealthy patrons, the more funds the missionary enterprise could hope to receive and the faster the fame of the Society of Jesus would grow.

- 92 In Western demonology a familiar is “a small animal or imp kept as a witch’s attendant, given to her by the devil or inherited from another witch. In general the familiar is understood as a “low-ranking demon.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Familiar.” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/familiar>
- 93 Gaspar Vilela to the Fathers and Brothers of the Society of Jesus, Sakai, 1562, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.114r. Vilela had already written extensively on this topic in his letter to António de Quadros and the Jesuits in India, Sakai, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1561, *Documentos*, vol. 2, p.356.
- 94 Gaspar Vilela to the Fathers and Brothers of the Society of Jesus, Sakai, 1562, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.114r. On the mediaeval system of temple governance see Seita, *Chūsei jiin hōshi no kenkyū: jiin no tasū kessei to jiin hōshiki* 中世寺院法史の研究: 寺院の多数決制と寺院法式. Tōkyō: Keibundō, 1995; Rambelli, “Buddhist Republican Thought and Institutions in Japan: Preliminary Considerations”. Baskind (Ed.), *Scholars of Buddhism in Japan: Buddhist Studies in the 21st Century*. Kyoto: International Center for Japanese Studies, 2009.
- 95 Luís Fróis, Nagasaki, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1585, in *Cartas*, vol. 2, p.162r.

The mission in Kyōto also allowed Jesuits to become acutely aware of the tensions between competing Buddhist lineages, which too often degenerated in feuds and armed conflicts that the missionaries might have witnessed, and sometimes resulted in schismatic movements. Vilela's letter, for instance, attests to the split that occurred in the Shingon school in the twelfth century and fostered the activities of warrior-monks (*sōhei*):

Among the followers [of Kōbō Daishi] there were many thefts, robberies, and fights, causing many deaths. One of the followers, called Kakuban [Cacubao], left with some others, and ordained this kind of bonzos that they call Negoro. Among these, some pray continuously, others go to war, and all of them have to make every day five arrows, and always have their weapons ready. They worship their founder Kakuban.<sup>96</sup>

Divisions within a denomination must have been a familiar reality to the Jesuits, who witnessed similar strives in sixteenth-century Europe. Significantly, Vilela draws attention to the manner in which a new lineage was created, noting that Kakuban (1095–1143) had the power to ordain new monks. Kakuban and Kūkai are thus clearly identified as the initiators of two competing Shingon lineages, one with its headquarters on Mount Kōya, the other in the valley at Negoro-ji.

These accounts reveal a marked interest for Buddhist institutional configuration. The missionaries recognised the importance of Buddhist institutions among the Japanese and the close relationship monasteries entertained with the political world, in particular in the capital area. Their later writings even comment on how quickly the capital recovered its role as the country's Buddhist centre, less than a decade after Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) burned down the establishment on Mount Hiei.<sup>97</sup> Eventually, Jesuits tried to replicate elements of the Buddhist organisation for the benefit of the mission. Valignano, for example, identified the Gozan system, which regulated the temple network of Rinzai Zen, as the Japanese counterpart of the Society of Jesus. Since its head temple, Nanzen-ji, was located in the capital, Valignano understood the Gozan structure to have developed in the refined culture of the court and considered it suitable for city-dwellers, such as the Jesuits themselves. Accordingly, as part of the administrative changes he implemented in the mission, he instructed missionaries to follow the customs and etiquette of the Gozan system so that they could acquire the same authority granted to Buddhist monks.<sup>98</sup>

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96 Gaspar Vilela to the Fathers and Brothers of the Society of Jesus, Sakai, 1562, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.114v.

97 Gaspar Coelho to the General, Nagasaki, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1582, in *Cartas*, vol. 2, p.30v.

98 See "How to acquire and maintain authority when dealing with the Japanese" (*Cerimoniale*, pp.123–157). In a revised version, compiled after criticism received from the General, the explanation of specific aspects of the Gozan system disappeared (*Cerimoniale*, pp.282–313).



## Devotion and Piety on Mount Kōya

It was not only the institutional side of Japanese Buddhism that missionaries got to understand better once they moved out of Kyūshū. They became familiar with the physical landscape of sacred sites and absorbed the popular narratives that circulated about the spiritual power of these places. The charisma of individual religious figures and the devotional practices they inspired attracted their attention. The cult of Kūkai is a case in point. His name was well-known among Japanese and Jesuits alike: Kōbō Daishi had been first mentioned in Lancillotto's 1548 report and the missionaries were keen to report on his deeds. This does not mean that the image of Kūkai they conveyed was necessarily positive. Vilela, for instance, presented Kūkai as a learned but diabolic figure:

This monastery [on Mount Kōya] was founded by a man called Kōbō Daishi [Combodaxi]. This name, Daishi, is like the [academic] degree of Master among us. This man was inventor and teacher of great sins among the Japanese. Especially, he was the first who invented sodomy in Japan. He made a pact with the devil and for this reason he performed many fake miracles, and he would prophesy many things.<sup>99</sup>

While the rhetorical depiction of a Buddhist holy man as the evil other is not unexpected in missionary writings, stories of the exceptional powers of Kūkai must have fascinated –and perhaps alarmed –the missionaries. At one point in his *Historia*, Fróis even suggested that it was thanks to “the cult of the devil” promoted by Kūkai on Mount Kōya that the province in which Mount Kōya is located, Kii-no-kuni, was never attacked during the civil wars.<sup>100</sup>

Jesuits appear to have been aware that Mount Kōya was not only the headquarters of the Shingon school but a centre of extraordinary devotion and piety. They describe in detail how the mountain became the last abode of Kūkai:

Already old, [Kōbō Daishi] had a house made underground in this monastery; he put himself there, still alive, and had somebody close it from outside. He said he could not die naturally and wanted to sleep, because after many thousands of years a man called Miroku would come to Japan to reform the world. Only then Kōbō Daishi would come out of his cave; nobody should dare open that place before that time [...] So they closed the doors and he was buried, and his soul is now suffering great torments in hell.<sup>101</sup>

This description of Kūkai's entry into perpetual meditation resonates with the accounts we find in Japanese origin stories and hagiographic narratives, elaborated

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99 Gaspar Vilela to the Fathers of the Convent of Avis, Goa, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1571, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.327r.

100 Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, vol. 4 (1984), p.173.

101 Gaspar Vilela to the Fathers of the Convento of Avis, Goa, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1571, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.327r.

throughout the medieval period to promote a devotional cult around Kūkai and attract pilgrims to Mount Kōya. For instance, one of the oldest of these tales, the tenth-century *Kongōbuji konryū shugyō engi*, recounts that “[Kūkai]’s entry in meditation simply meant that he had closed his eyes and did not speak... Since he was still living like an ordinary person, no funeral was performed... His disciples closed the structure and people had to get permission to enter it.”<sup>102</sup> The mysterious afterlife of Kūkai was also depicted in handscrolls, such as the fourteenth-century *Illustrated Deeds of the Great Master of Kōya*, widely circulated and later printed<sup>103</sup> (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Kūkai sitting in meditation in the cave where he had been buried. His hair has grown long and one of disciple visiting the cave gives him a haircut. From a Edo period printed version of the *Illustrated Deeds of the Great Master of Kōya* (*Kōya daishi gyōjō zuga* 高野大師行狀圖畫). © Kokubungaku kenkyū shiryōkan, YAヤ4-330-1~2.

102 Translated in Tanabe, “The Founding of Mt Kōya and Kūkai’s Eternal Meditation”. *Religions of Japan in Practice*. Tanabe (Ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, pp.354–359. On the legends about Kūkai, see Takeuchi, *Kōbō Daishi denshō to jijitsu. Eden o yomitoku* 弘法大師伝承と史実: 絵伝を読み解く. Ōsaka: Tokishobō, 2008.

103 Variously known as *Kōya daishi gyōjō ekotoba* or *Kōya daishi gyōjō zue*, it exists in many variants. Several printed versions from the Edo period may be perused on the website of the National Institute of Japanese Literature (<https://kotenseki.nijl.ac.jp/>)

Other references to Kūkai in Jesuit sources describe him as being “alive for many years in a cave, waiting with his hands raised for Miroku [Maitreya, the Buddha of the future] or Śākyamuni;”<sup>104</sup> or waiting to be resurrected after the arrival of the *literato* Miroku<sup>105</sup>; or simply waiting “to come back.”<sup>106</sup> Kūkai’s exact condition after being closed in his “cave” was not so clear to the Jesuits, and it is curious that they were not concerned to determine it. Were they afraid of the similarities between Kūkai’s eternal life and Christian beliefs? Or did they consider such a belief incoherent and confused, as one would expect from teachings imparted by the devil, and thus undeserving further attention? The preoccupation with the possible parallelisms between Kūkai and Christ must have played a role in the missionaries’ decision to describe popular beliefs without delving much into the specificities of their nature. Had the missionaries probed into the subject further, their writings would have lost the edifying function they set out to fulfil.

Jesuit sources, however, go to great lengths to convey the significance of Kūkai’s status in Japanese Buddhism. The perceived presence of Kūkai in his living body had in fact created an extensive graveyard around his resting place (*okunoin*) and a variety of devotional practices were performed there. Jesuit letters depict Mount Kōya as a coveted burial place that people from all sixty-six Japanese provinces aspired to<sup>107</sup>:

When the honourable people of other kingdoms die, after being cremated they all send their teeth to Mount Kōya [Coya]. There they are buried with the [deceased’s] title [carved] in stone. They believe that everyone who sends their teeth to be buried near Kōbō Daishi is immediately beatified and saintly.<sup>108</sup>

[...] after cremation a small amount of ash, the teeth and a few small bones of the deceased are placed in a small wooden box wrapped in paper. This box is offered to another temple, built there [on Mount Koya] on purpose to receive such offers. The monks say that those who send these boxes with bones and alms will be part of the unbeatable and triumphant army of Kōbō Daishi, who will come to restore and save the world.<sup>109</sup>

To understand better how important this practice is in Japan and the great veneration this cult is given, [you should know that] it is more than five hundred years that four

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104 Baltazar Gago to the Jesuits in Portugal, Goa, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1562, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, p.603.

105 Luís Fróis to the Fathers and Brothers of the Society of Jesus in China and India, Miyako, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1565, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.174.

106 Luís Fróis, Nagasaki, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1585, in *Cartas*, vol. 2, p.162r.

107 The Jesuits described Japan as being comprised of sixty-six kingdoms. See, for example, *Documentos*, vol. 1, p.24\*.

108 Luís Fróis to the Fathers and Brothers of the College of Goa, Sakai, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1566, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.211v.

109 Luís Fróis, Nagasaki, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1585, in *Cartas*, vol. 2, p. 162r.

thousand lamps burn day and night in front of this demon, put there by kings and lords, who pay much rent to keep them there. They tell me that there are three or four lamps that have a hundred and more wicks, and give more light than four burning torches. The oil is always so expensive in Japan, especially around here, that usually a bowl costs one golden *pardão*, even if it is bad oil.<sup>110</sup>

This description of the worshipping hall at the *Okunoin* is precise and quite faithful to historical records, hinting at the possibility that the missionaries actually visited Mount Kōya.<sup>111</sup>

## The Performance of Religion: Festivals for *Kami* and Buddhas

Another devotional aspect of Japanese Buddhism that captured the attention of the missionaries was the way *kami* and buddhas were honoured in community rituals. Living in the capital city allowed the Jesuits to observe some of the most magnificent festivals in the country. These were public events that displayed the strength of Buddhism as a religion, and Jesuits frequently reported on them in their letters and other written documents. Two celebrations were especially important in sixteenth-century Kyōto: *sannōsai*, the festival for the *kami* of Mount Hiei, which took place in Sakamoto in spring; and *gionsai*, the festival of the Gion shrine deities, which took place in town in summer. These two festivals feature in Jesuit narratives, sometimes with extensive descriptions that provide readers with insights into the nature of the deities worshipped and their sacred places.

Let us first consider the Hie deities. Although Jesuits were not granted access to the temples on top of Mount Hiei, they appear to have visited the shrine complex situated at the eastern base of the mountain, in the town of Sakamoto. Luís Fróis gives an account of the Hie shrine (today called Hiyoshi Taisha) in a chapter of his *Historia* devoted to the events that occurred in the year 1569:

The shrine of Sannó [...] was near famous Mount Hiei. It was situated on a mountain called Hachiōji [Fachiuongi], and below it, there was a fresh valley with twenty-two shrines [varelas] of Kami, very prosperous and pleasant to see. Inside these shrines, there were seven big float-like objects, richly decorated and well-made. They were used once a year in a solemn festival, during which all the monks of Mount Hiei descended in procession with them, and then they would sail, bearing arms, in a

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110 Luís Fróis to the Fathers and Brothers of the College of Goa, Sakai, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1566, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.211v.

111 For a description of the contemporary appearance of the *okunoin* and its lantern hall, see Nicoloff, *Sacred Kōyasan*. Albany: State University of New York, 2008, pp.224–31.

nearby lagoon, which is 22 leagues long. This was called the matsuri [maçuri] of Sakamoto.<sup>112</sup>

Sannō (lit. ‘King of the mountain’) is a collective term for the deities protectors of the Tendai school –combinatory entities that were at the same time *kami* and *hotoke*. There were twenty-one of them, with seven being considered the central deities.<sup>113</sup> The seven objects Fróis describes are their temporary abodes (*mikoshi*), carried down during the festival in a procession which, today as when the Jesuits observed it, departs from the shrine complex and reaches the banks of Lake Biwa after crossing the town of Sakamoto (Figs. 2 and 3)



**Fig. 2.** Venerating Sannō: the portable shrines of the main Sannō deities. Details from *Hie Sannō sairei emaki*, seventeenth century, colour and gold on paper. © Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Japonaises.

112 Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, vol. 2. (1981), p.247.

113 On the history of the Hie shrine and the Sannō deities, see Kageyama, *Hieizan* 比叡山. Tōkyō: Kadogawa shoten, 1975, and Sagai, *Hiyoshi taisha to Sannō gongen* 日吉大社と山王権現. Kyōto: Jinbun Shoin, 1992, which devotes a chapter to *sannōsai*. In English see Breen; Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp.66–128.



**Fig. 3.** Sannō kami carried down from the Hie shrine. Details from *Hie Sannō sairei emaki*, seventeenth century, colour and gold on paper. © Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Japonaises.

In a letter written from the capital on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1571, Luís Fróis provided his superior with further details on the Hie deities and again described the popularity and opulence of the shrine complex and the lavish festival staged on land and water, for which no expense appeared to have been spared. Interestingly, Fróis must have seen such magnificence of places and performances collapse in front of his own eyes, for the letter was written just a few days after Nobunaga had reduced to ashes shrines and non-religious buildings in Sakamoto as well as the temples on Mount Hiei.<sup>114</sup>

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114 According to *Shinchōkōki*, the key source on the career of Oda Nobunaga, Nobunaga's raid took place on the twelfth day of the ninth month of the second year of the Genki era, that is, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1571. See Ōta, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*. Elisona; Lamers (Ed. and Transl.). Leiden: Brill, 2011, pp.164–166. Jesuits reported repeatedly on this dramatic episode in the history of Japan. Fróis, however, misdated the assault on Mt Hiei by a day. (Ibidem, p.40)

There was also on Mount Hiei a shrine built on the top of a mountain, dedicated to a certain idol, which they call Sannó, much worshipped in all of Japan.<sup>115</sup> This was a place of great pilgrimage, where they asked for health, riches, and a long life. On this mountain there are a lot of baboons, unlimited in number, dedicated to Sannó. To throw stones at these baboons, or hurt them in any other way, is an offence to this idol, and also a grave sin. Offences to this idol are punished immediately, and the offender becomes a leper. At the foot of this mountain range there is a flat valley, near the town I mentioned earlier called “upper Sakamoto,” where there were built some ten or twelve temples dedicated to this Sannó. They were the most beautiful, rich, and lustrous (even if small) that were found in Japan [...] [331v] It is an ancient tradition of Hie that every year the monks have a very sumptuous festival for this idol Sannó: they descend from the summit, all up in arms, carrying on their shoulders seven huge chairs which are kept in seven temples of the valley below. These chairs with all their hand-made decorations [...] cost 1500 *taels* each. With these seven chairs on their shoulders, on seven boats, they entered the lagoon of the kingdom of Omi, which is huge, and there they danced with them, and made great solemnities in honour of this idol.<sup>116</sup> (Fig. 4)

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115 *Cartas* wrongly transcribes Sannó as “Canon” throughout, making the passage incomprehensible (see also Schurhammer, *Shintō. The way of the gods in Japan*. Bonn: Kurt Schroeder, 1923, p.67, note 4). The original document, however, has Sannó. See ARSI, Jap. Sin. 7–I, 63v.

116 Luís Fróis to António de Quadros, Miyako, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1571, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.331rv. The opulence of the Hie shrines is perfectly illustrated by a pair of six-panel screens, one showing the buildings of the shrine complex with pilgrims coming and going, the other the segment of the festival where the portable shrines are on boats, sailing on Lake Biwa. British Museum, 1949-0709-0-9 and 1949,0709,0.10. See <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A>.



**Fig. 4.** Portable shrines of the Sannō deities on boats. Details from a pair of six-panel screens illustrating the Hie shrine and its festival. Kanei period (1624–1644).  
© Trustees of the British Museum, London.



Monkeys were considered to be vehicle of the Hie deities and therefore those that inhabited the space of the deities were regarded as sacred animals. Indeed, *Sannō gongen*, the combinatory aspect of these deities, is often represented as a monkey. As we have seen in the preceding sections, the Jesuits understood *kami* and buddhas to be part of a single religious system. Thus, Fróis is not surprised to see Buddhist monks carrying the *kami* in procession. (In fact, this was done by local parishioners [*ujiko*] from Sakamoto, with lower-ranking monks in decorative armours leading the progress.)

Jesuits also seem to have realised the power relation between the shrines in Sakamoto and the monastic establishment on Mount Hiei. They described Sakamoto as a town “serving Mount Hiei” so that the monks “would not be disturbed by everyday activities” necessary to their sustenance.<sup>117</sup> The shrines indeed supplied the monks with financial support and service people (*jinin*, lit. shrine people), and Jesuits easily drew analogies between the logic of monastic support in Europe and Japan. One may even read a specifically Jesuit polemical tone in their calling attention to the abundance of free time that having an entire town at their service afforded the Tendai monks. The use of time in each religious order, and specifically in the Society of Jesus, was in fact a debated topic in Europe.<sup>118</sup>

Religious festivals also opened a window for missionaries to get a better grasp of the political dynamics between discrete sacred places and the institutions that linked them. In Jesuit sources, the Sannō festival appears connected with the capital’s other major festival, which has its devotional centre at the Gion shrine (today called Yasaka shrine). Vilela provides the first detailed description of these celebrations in a letter written in 1561 to his brethren in India:

Many things I saw, dearest brothers, of the worship of the devil in this land, *in which it seems the devil wanted to emulate the cult that is given and due to God Our Lord*. And I think you will be pleased in the Lord if you hear them, and after seeing such blindness in so many souls, you will recommend them to their Creator, to illuminate them and save them from such darkness. *It looks like the devil wanted to counterfeit the feast of Corpus Christi that the Holy Mother Church celebrates*. Because around the month of August they celebrate a festival, called Gion [Guivon] as it is dedicated to a man of that name, and they celebrate it in this way. First, they distribute among the streets’ officials the contraptions that each of them has to carry. On the day of the festival, in the morning, they go out in their manner of procession, according to which first come fifteen or more floats covered in silks and other riches. These floats have very tall masts. Inside the chariots, many children sing and play small drums and fifes. Each float is carried

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117 Luís Fróis to António de Quadros, Miyako, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1571, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.331r.

118 For example, the Jesuits’ decision not to sing the Hours in choir and to dedicate that time to other apostolic activities was heavily contested by Church authorities (O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, pp.134–135). The Jesuits transposed these tensions to the Japanese context and often denounced the laziness and luxury they perceived in Buddhist monks’ lives.

by thirty or forty men. Each one is followed by the [towns]people and the officials in their uniforms, arms, spears, hatchets, *naginata* made by a hanger as a blade attached to half a spear, well set up. All chariots queue like this with their people and officials. The chariots with children are followed by others covered in silk, carrying armed people and many painted antiquities and other remarkable things. In their proper order they visit the temple of the festival idol. And thus they spend the morning. In the afternoon they go out with a very big sacred palanquin which comes out from the same shrine; it is carried by many people who pretend they cannot carry it, saying that it contains their god. People worship this palanquin with great devotion. Together with this [palanquin] there is another, which is said to be of the mistress of the idol, whom he loved and took with him because she was young. There also is – a rifle shot away – another palanquin which, they say, belongs to the idol's wife. When those carrying [the wife's] palanquin see the idol's palanquin approaching together with that of his mistress, they run from one side to the other, suggesting that [the wife] is mad with rage to see her husband with his mistress. Here the people start to feel bad for her, seeing her so distressed: some cry, some get on their knees and worship her. And so, when the palanquins get close, together they go to the temple of the idol, where the procession ends.<sup>119</sup>

Gion festival, whose origin may be traced back to ninth-century rituals to appease vengeful spirits (*goryōe*), was a summer celebration to exorcise Gozū Tennō, the ox-headed god of epidemics, and venerate it as a protective deity.<sup>120</sup> A composite event, it consisted of different segments that culminated in two parades: the religious ritual proper, which revolved around the Gion shrine and had its climax in the procession of the three large portable shrines of the deities (Gozū and his family); and an extravaganza presided by Kyōto townspeople, who erected and paraded across town gigantic floats (*yamaboko*), richly decorated with lacquered ceilings, metals and tapestries and textiles of diverse provenance<sup>121</sup> (Fig. 5). Vilela accurately documents how these public portions of the festival were enacted in the sixteenth century, conveying the contrast between the slow and ordered progress of the floats in the morning and the exuberant pace of the portable shrines carried around in the evening by a crown of noisy men.

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119 Gaspar Vilela to António de Quadros and the Jesuits in India, Sakai, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1561, in *Documentos*, vol. 2, pp. 349–351. Cf. *Cartas*, vol. 1, pp.91v–92r.

120 See McMullin, “On Placating the Gods and Pacifying the Populace: The Case of the Gion “Goryō” Cult”. *History of Religions*, vol. 27, no. 3, (Feb. 1988), pp.270–293.

121 On the medieval aspects of Gion festival see Wakita, *Chūsei Kyōto to Gion matsuri: ekijin to toshi no seikatsu* 中世京都と祇園祭：疫神と都市の生活. Tōkyō: Yōshikawa kōbunkan, 2016; Kawashima, *Gion matsuri: shukusai no miyako* 祇園祭：祝祭の京都. Tōkyō: Yōshikawa kōbunkan, 2010; Kawachi, *Kaiga shiryō ga kataru Gion matsuri: sengokuki Gion sairei no yōsō* 絵画史料が語る祇園祭：戦国期祇園祭礼の様相. Kyōto: Tankōsha, 2015. Whether the float parade represented a separate, secular dimension of the festival is a point debated by scholars. Jesuit narratives do not make such distinction. In fact, townspeople also erected altars in each neighbourhood and some of the floats hosted a statue or other image of protective deities. This festival is still performed today.



**Fig. 5.** One of the floats paraded in the Gion festival, Taishi yamaboko. Detail of a door, seventeenth century, colour on wood. Attributed to Kanō Atsunobu. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

This account is significant in many ways. First of all, we should note that Vilela's letter, which we have translated here from the original manuscript, was censored when it was printed. In fact, the passages in italics have been omitted in the Évora edition, which consists of published letters. Secondly, the letter suggests a comparison between Gion festival and an important celebration in the Catholic calendar, that of Corpus Christi. Those references to the Christian pageant are precisely the sentences that have been censored. Unravelling the logic of appreciation of Japanese practices and the ensuing reaction to their similarities with Christian rituals sheds light on the process by which the missionaries understood Japanese religious practices, valued them, and at the same time were anxious about them.<sup>122</sup>

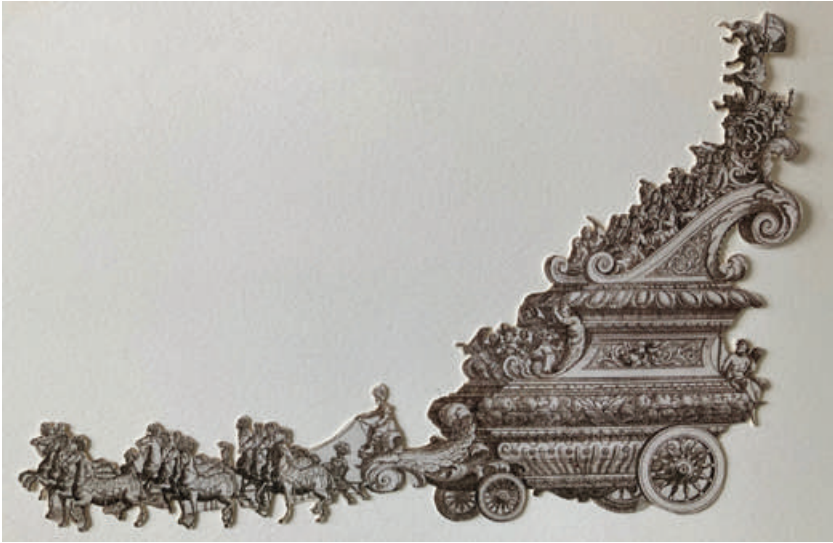
The comparison between Gion festival and the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi could not have been more appropriate to make Jesuit audiences in Europe grasp the scale of this religious celebration and the force of the religion it represented. Corpus Christi (or Corpus Domini) is a Catholic feast that glorifies the sacrament of the Eucharist. Established in the thirteenth century, by the sixteenth century it had become one of the most important events in the Catholic calendar, celebrated across the Catholic world, from Portugal to Italy to Austria, and exported to the colonies.<sup>123</sup> Like Gion festival, it was a urban ritual that showcased the authority of kings and queens and the power of merchants and craftsmen; after the Reformation, it became a triumphal progress, a symbol of Catholic identity. Gion festival had by the fifteenth century become the grand festival of Kyōto's flourishing merchant community, memorable for its solemnity and magnificence. The elaborate shape of the floats progressing through the town, the affiliation of each float with a distinct neighbourhood, the involvement of the entire city, the music, the wealth displayed in the decorations of the floats and of the private altars in each neighbourhood, were all elements that were familiar to the Jesuits from Christian celebrations. The vivid details of Vilela's narration of the Gion festival could indeed apply to contemporary processions of saints in Catholic Europe, where extravagant constructions were carried around by townsmen, with space for musicians to sit and play throughout the progress, and on top an image of the saint being

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122 For a discussion of other aspects of Buddhist practice, which the missionaries found resonant with their own and drew upon to carve their own space in society, see Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*. Leiden, Boston & Koln: Brill, 2001.

123 See Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Checa Cremades and Fernandez-Gomez, *Festival Culture in the World of the Spanish Habsburg*. London: Routledge, 2016. The Spanish introduced the festival to Latin America. The celebration of the Corpus Domini in Cuzco, Peru, was of particular importance and is still performed today. Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco*, Duke University Press, 2003. Sumptuous processions have also continued in Spain, for instance in Valencia.

celebrated<sup>124</sup> (Fig. 6). Vilela rightly described the Gion floats as “carros triunfantes,” the term that would become standard for the spectacular floats celebrating Christianity in baroque Europe.



**Fig. 6.** “Carro triunfante” celebrating Saint Rosalia, the patron saint of Palermo. Detail from an engraved plate illustrating the festival parade, included in Vio, *Li giorni d’oro di Palermo nella trionfale solennità di S. Rosalia vergine palermitana celebrata l’anno 1693*. Palermo: Pietro Coppula Stamp. camerale, 1694.

Missionaries’ writings convey the sense of togetherness that Japanese festivals displayed, supported as they were by the efforts of the rich and the poor and by the city’s ecclesiastic and temporal authorities. It is also clear from Jesuit writings that the capital’s two major festivals were not merely local celebrations but were replicated in various areas of Japan, reinforcing the idea that Buddhism was a national religion with a ritual calendar shared across the country. In his *Historia Fróis*, for instance, writes:

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124 One example is the “carro triunfante” designed by engineer Amato for the 1693 celebration of Saint Rosalia, the patron saint of Palermo. See Vio, Ignazio de, *Li giorni d’oro di Palermo nella trionfale solennità di S. Rosalia vergine palermitana celebrata l’anno 1693*. Palermo: Pietro Coppula Stamp. camerale, 1694. A digital version of the copy in the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University is available on <https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3440657>.

It is custom in every town, when they do the solemn festivities of the kami and buddhas, for all the population to participate and help with their contraptions, as we do in Portugal for the Corpus Christi and similar ones. At that time, in Shimabara, they were about to do the festival for an idol they call Gion.<sup>125</sup>

Was it problematic to remind readers of the similarity between Buddhist and Christian festivals? The censored passages in Vilela's letter highlight the Jesuits' concern with how to deal best with the obvious similarities they encountered in Japan. Comparisons were made by missionaries in order to help their superiors understand what they observed and the situation in which they found themselves. However, they had to be cautious in their approach to other religious practices, especially when they appeared to be too similar to Catholic practices, for confusion could arise about the orthodoxy of Catholicism. Therefore, we often find a rhetorical stance that posited resemblances in the religious other as the workings of the devil. This argument had a long history in Christian apologetics and was first used to justify similarities between the gods of classic antiquity and other pagan gods and Christian saints – although it is not clear how convincing this official argument was in the eyes of the missionaries themselves. With a similar logic, references to the imitation of Catholic rites were often removed from printed editions of missionary correspondence, for they were considered dangerous suggestions for the readers rather than edifying examples. No extensive comparison has been made between published letters and original manuscripts, and therefore it is difficult to establish how often missionaries drew on such comparisons.

A few words should also be spent on the perception of the festivals' political dynamics. It is compelling that Jesuit sources connected the Sannō festival to the Gion festival. Undoubtedly, this association was common among the Japanese of the time, as attested by the depiction of the two festivals as a set in visual sources, such as paintings and decorative screens.<sup>126</sup> Taken together the two celebrations demonstrated Kyōto's importance as the country's religious centre. The connection between the two festivals also epitomized the political links between the institutions that carried them out, for Gion was a subordinate shrine (*matsusha*) of the Hie shrine and both Hie and Gion shrines were under Tendai jurisdiction. The cost of the two festivals were covered by taxes levied by Enryakuji. Fróis speaks of the relation between the two festivals:

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125 Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, vol. 1 (1979), p.319.

126 See, for instance, the pair of six-panel folding screens attributed to the Tosa school in the holdings of the Suntory Museum. Dated to the Muromachi period (sixteenth century), these screens are regarded the oldest illustration of the floats of the Gion festival. See the museum webpage and McKelway, *Capitalscapes: Folding Screens and Political Imagination in Late Medieval Kyoto*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

When the festival of Sakamoto had ended, immediately here in Miyako there would be another for an idol, or kami, called Gion [Guiòn]; it was the most solemn of the year, and it seemed people from all over Japan were participating. It seems like the devil wanted to counterfeit the feast of the Corpus Christi, because they did all the dances, games, and inventions that could be done in Miyako. So that Your Reverence understands the influence of Mount Hiei over Miyako, if it happened that it was not possible to do the Sannó festival of Sakamoto for one year, that of Miyako could not be done for thirty-three years.<sup>127</sup>

Japanese sources indeed attest that when the *sannō* festival did not take place because of interference from Tendai monastics (usually low-ranking monks using the portable shrines for their protests), the Gion festival was cancelled or at least delayed.<sup>128</sup> By linking the two festivals, thus, the Jesuits highlighted the power that the Tendai establishment on Mount Hiei held over *kami* and buddhas, as well as over the capital city. For a time, this position made the Tendai monks, in the eyes of the missionaries, the ideal Buddhist interlocutors of Christianity. Indeed, even before setting up the mission in the capital, Jesuits had tried to gain access to Mount Hiei, hoping to be allowed to preach to the monks of Enryaku-ji. Unfortunately, the missionaries never managed to establish close contacts with the school they perceived as the most powerful in Japan, and in later years they turned again their attention towards Zen monks.

## Epilogue

The examination of Jesuit writings recounting their encounter with Japanese Buddhism in the sixteenth century has revealed a twisting and complex process of learning about and evaluating the religious Other.

Both the patterns by which Jesuits acquired knowledge of Japanese Buddhism and the hermeneutical framework they used to describe it were shaped by a Eurocentric point of view, by the Christian worldview from which the missionaries

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127 Luís Fróis to António de Quadros, Miyako, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1571, in *Cartas*, vol. 1, p.331v. It is not clear what the 33 year hiatus mentioned by Fróis refers to. Gion festival had been interrupted in 1467, at the beginning of the Ōnin war, and was staged again in 1500, after 33 year, but this had no relation to the Hie shrine. However, in 1533, at the time of the so-called Lotus uprisings of the Tenbun years, the *shōgun* suspended the shrine-related segments of the festival (while the float parade organized by the neighbourhoods took place), giving as a reason the fact that Hie shrine had cancelled its festival. (See Gay, *The Money Lenders of Late Medieval Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001, pp.186–7 and p.279.) Since this suspension occurred 33 years after the restoration of the festival, it is possible that Jesuits misunderstood the temporal reference.

128 Kawauchi, “Sengokuki Gion-e ni kansuru kisoteki kōsatsu” 戦国期祇園会に関する基礎的考察. *Shirin*, vol. 85, no. 5 (2002) pp.700–723.

proceeded, and by the historical experience of the Society of Jesus at home and in Asia. The complex expectations Jesuits had regarding any gentile belief coloured their first interactions with “the laws of Japan.” The missionaries looked for elements they assumed Buddhism ought to have and emphasised aspects of it which appeared puzzling and which, accordingly, could support their critical agenda, namely, to show the superiority of Christianity. This led the Jesuits to organise the limited information they had into rubrics and categories that chiefly made sense in the context of Christian theology. What emerged was a somehow distorted framing of Buddhism, which rested on the Christian understanding of divine Providence and its work in the world. Whether perceived as a form of Christianity or as a “product of the devil,” Buddhism was never understood on its own terms.

As it happens in many intercultural relations, the interaction between Jesuits and Buddhists was heavily influenced by the knowledge (or lack thereof) of the language the missionaries had acquired. Inadequate understanding meant errors in translations that could have enormous consequences for the purpose of the mission. The more the Jesuits built up their capacity to engage with Buddhist sources and Buddhist practices in Japanese, the more articulated their depictions of Buddhism became.

The process of documenting and elucidating Japanese Buddhism did not proceed efficiently throughout the period we have examined. While Jesuits aimed at systematising the information they collected to make sense of the nature of Buddhism as a competing religion, their work was far from systematic and it appears discontinuous in time, affected as it was by the realities of the missionary field.

The image of Buddhism that emerges at the end of the sixteenth century is that of a national religion as complex and powerful as Christianity. It is a religion founded on the revelation of the books of “Xaca,” which worships “hotoke and kami,” but ultimately relies on a single principle; a religion divided into schools that embrace different interpretations of the sacred books and rituals, but are united in religious piety and the performance of devotional practices. The understanding of Buddhism afforded by the Japanese experience might have not always been fully accurate, but it was a crucial achievement for the Jesuits. The knowledge acquired of Buddhism in Japan, albeit not precise, would in fact be put to use in other missions, influencing Jesuit understandings of religious realities in other parts of the Asian continent.



Alexandra Curvelo / Angelo Cattaneo (eds.)

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