

Spreading the Faith: Catechesis, Doctrine, and Debates in Jesuit Missionary Work in Japan (1549-1614)

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Nanban historical sources provide important information concerning the work and praxis of Jesuit missionaries in Japan during the 16th and 17th centuries. The purpose of this communication is to draw attention to three aspects of the Jesuit missionary work in Japan, all of which can be perceived from those sources.

The first is the distinction, that was traditionally made in the Catholic Church, between catechesis and doctrine. It will be argued here that this distinction can be perceived distinctly in the documents produced by the Jesuit mission in Japan.

The second is that much of what was taught in Jesuit catechesis was not specifically Christian in nature but was, in a large part, the exposition of the basic tenets of Scholasticism, which was then the mainstream Western philosophical school of thought, and had much in common with any deist cosmovision.

The third is that the debates between Buddhists and Christians, as described in the extant *Nanban* historical sources, were mainly philosophical discussions, not religious debates, even though the ideas discussed in those philosophical debates certainly had religious implications.

These three simple and basic ideas seem to be crucial to a correct analysis and interpretation of some of the more important events and some of the more significant intellectual products of the Jesuit missionaries in Japan, namely the debates they engaged with Buddhist monks and the catechisms and doctrines they produced.

Prior to expounding on these three points, it is important to remember why the Jesuits came to Japan. The answer is almost everywhere in Jesuit historical sources. It can be found in the first sentence of the *History of Japan*, *日本史*, written by Luis Fróis (1532—1597). There, Fróis states that the purpose of the Jesuits' work in Japan was to communicate to the Japanese the knowledge and awareness of their Creator, and therefore to effect in them the benefits of His redemption:

*Willing God our Lord to **communicate** the shining light of His clemency and the marvelous radiance of His mercy through the gloomy darkness of idolatries in which, for so long, the Japanese had lived, [...] so distant from **the knowledge and awareness of their Creator**, He commanded that, to effect in them the benefits of His redemption, in the year of 1548 Father Master Francisco [...] met in [Malaca] with a Japanese pagan noble named Anjiró, who later took the name of Paulo de Santa Fé [...].⁽¹⁾*

And what means did the Jesuits employ to communicate the Christian faith? There were many ways, including preaching and printing, debating and teaching. Concerning teaching, two types of religious teaching may be distinguished, catechetical teaching and doctrinal teaching. Let us examine first how catechetical teaching was different from doctrinal teaching.

Although the distinction between catechism and doctrine has now largely been lost, technically these two words meant distinct things. What was *catechism* or *catechesis*? It was a lesson, or a book with such a lesson, directed to a public that was not Christian, in order to make known and acceptable to them the basic tenets of Christianity and to eventually lead them to baptism. As it was directed to non-Christians, it usually argued for the validity of the claims

(1) P. Luís Fróis, S.J., *História de Japam*, ed. by P. José Wicki, S.J., Lisbon, Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, 1976-1984, Vol. I, p. 17. Emphasis added. Except when otherwise indicated, all English translations were made by the author.

made through recourse to philosophical reasoning, not by arguments drawn from the Bible, the creeds or other Christian prayers. Frequently, it included a refutation of the religions held by the target audience, as it was the case of the Japanese catechisms of Xavier, Gago, and Valignano, and also by the one written by Ruggieri in China. Or, sometimes, as was the case with Ricci's Chinese catechism, it included a description of the commonalities, in this case between Christianity and Confucianism. It should then be stressed that catechesis, in the sixteenth century, needed not to deal only about Christianity; it could also be about other religions and their accompanying systems of thought.

And what was *doctrine*? It was a lesson, or a book with such a lesson, directed to people who had already been baptized. Argumentation concerning any topic presented was made from the Bible or from church writings, usually not from philosophy. As a rule, doctrine teaching was made based on the explanation of the meaning of formulas already used by those being taught: symbols such as the Sign of the Cross or prayers like the Our Father; the Creed; the Commandments and so on.

Another distinction between catechism and doctrine is that, as a rule, much simpler language was used in the latter.

The clear-cut conceptual distinction made between catechism and doctrine was sometimes blurred in practice. This blur happened sometimes in Europe, but seldom in the mission field. And the blur, when it occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was mainly formal, not material. There were, for example, some European doctrines in the sixteenth century that had the word "catechism" in their title but, in what followed, they presented themselves as the doctrines they really were.⁽²⁾

Therefore, catechism is either the oral teaching to non-believers, usually adults, as a preparation to receive baptism, or a book with that same end. This usage is employed, as a matter of fact, in many *Nanban* historical sources. Let's see some examples from Fróis's *History*. The first is the account of the meeting in 1560 between Brother Lourenço (1526—1592) and Yamandano Xozaimon and his friends, who were not Christians:

Br. Lourenço, not aware of who they were, began preaching following the order of the catechism, wishing to show them the great difference between the camis and fotoques, which the Japanese sects profess, and Deus Our Lord, who is Creator of the Universe, etc.⁽³⁾

In this excerpt the expression "following the order of the Catechism" should be noted. This expression suggests that there was a standard order of subjects in catechetical instruction, what can be verified in the accounts concerning catechesis found in *Nanban* historical records.

In the following passage, Fróis tells us how Brother Lourenço preached catechism to Yuki Tadamasu 結城忠正 (fl. sixteenth century) and Kiyohara no Shigekata 清原枝賢 (1520—1590), two pagans who would eventually convert later:

[Br. Lourenço] began preaching the catechism to them with much liberty and trust in Deus Our Lord, exposing each matter in its order, and they also followed asking many questions and doubts to the Brother [...] who by God's goodness answered them all to their complete satisfaction.⁽⁴⁾

Here again we note that the catechism is taught not to Christians but to non-Christians. Note also that brother Lourenço explained the catechism *in its order* and that after his exposition many questions were made.

While in these two excerpts "catechism" was used to mean oral teaching, in the next one it means a book:

With him [養方軒 Yofo Paulo] through time the Catechism with which pagans are taught was revised with the information he gave concerning the Japanese sects and antiquities, as he had a profound knowledge of

(2) For some examples of this see José Miguel Pinto dos Santos, "Illustrations of *Doutrina*: Artwork in the Early Editions of Marcos Jorge's *Doutrina Cristã*", *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies*, II series, Vol. 2, pp. 149—167.

(3) Fróis, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 175. Emphasis added.

(4) *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 250. Emphasis added.

those matters.⁽⁵⁾

This passage refers to the catechism authored by Balthasar Gago (1520—1583) and Brother Lourenço. From this excerpt we can infer three important things. The first is that this catechism was used to teach pagans, not Christians. The second is that this catechism was subject to multiple revisions through time, revisions that were made with the help of Yofoken. Finally, we gather that these revisions were not mainly concerned with the exposition of the Christian religion, but focused mostly in the treatment of the Japanese sects.⁽⁶⁾ We can find other passages like these in the *Nanban* historical sources showing that catechism was taught to those who were not Christians.

On the other hand, doctrine is the teaching, either oral or in written form, that is directed to Christian believers concerning how they should rightly believe about God, that is *Faith*, what they should wish from God, that is *Hope*, and how they should act, that is *Charity*.

Let's see some examples. In his description of the mission in Bungo for the year of 1561, Fróis writes the following:

The Brothers João Fernandes and Duarte Sylva, in Funay preach alternately the catechism to the pagans and the sacraments of confession and Eucharist to the Christians. Brother Guilherme has had for many years the care of teaching the Christian doctrine to the young boys in Bungo, as well as in other places [...].⁽⁷⁾

In this passage, we see that two Jesuits taught, alternatively, the Catechism to pagans, and the sacraments of confession and Eucharist, that are subjects which properly belong to doctrine, to Christians. Although not explicitly stated in the text, it is not to be doubted that the young boys who were taught doctrine by Brother Guilherme were children from Christian households. Therefore, there is a clear distinction between what was inculcated to Christians and what was taught to pagans. Likewise, in Shimabara in 1563, the children who went to the doctrine classes were Christian:

There were at that time in Ximabara, counting only amongst the Christians, some two hundred children, of which some 70 would come to the doctrine, all being very well dressed because they were sons of rich men; almost every day they would dispute with pagans concerning the law of Deus, and were so able in answering the questions pagans usually pose that everybody who saw them became astounded [...].⁽⁸⁾

Likewise, the young men in the Arima seminary in 1582, who were drawn from Christian families, were taught doctrine, not catechesis:

[The young men] had their time allotted to [...] Christian doctrine, to read and write in our language, [...] to the Japanese and Chinese characters, [...] to grammar [...].⁽⁹⁾

Let us now turn to the subjects that were taught in catechesis. Much of catechesis, according to the records found in the *Nanban* historical sources, was a philosophical argument for some of the concepts that are shared by any deist or theist religion. The most frequent topics of catechesis in Japan were the creation of the universe, the properties of the soul, and Aristotelian theories concerning the physical world. Only after those being catechized had accepted these ideas would the catechist proceed to some of the main theological tenets of Christianity, and present dogmas such as the Trinity, Original Sin, and Redemption. In his *História* Fróis presents this scheme as follows:

First of all we prove that there is a Creator of the Universe, that the Universe had a beginning and is not eternal as some people believe and that the sun and the moon are not gods, and are not even endowed with life. We

(5) *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 172. Emphasis added.

(6) The Jesuits in Japan also made frequent revisions to clarify the vocabulary employed in their catechisms and doctrines. Concerning this process of revision in the Japanese doctrines see José Miguel Pinto dos Santos, "Mincing Words: Terminological Sublation in the Japanese Christian Doctrines", in A. Curvelo and A. Cattaneo (ed.), *Interactions Between Rivals: The Christian Mission and Buddhist Sects in Japan During the Portuguese Presence (c. 1549 – c. 1647)*, Peter Lang, in press).

(7) *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 199. Emphasis added.

(8) *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 315. Emphasis added.

(9) *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 301. Emphasis added.

then prove that **the soul lives forever** after its separation from the body and show the difference between the rational and the sensible soul, a distinction which is unknown to the people here.

After that we discuss all kinds of objections and difficulties as they are brought forward and answer questions that are asked about **various phenomena of nature**.⁽¹⁰⁾

We can see, therefore, that the missionaries would argue that the universe was created; that they would explain that men have rational souls, using arguments drawn from the *De Anima* treatises, and claim that the soul lives forever; and that they would then reply to questions made by their audience. Next, they would speak about various phenomena of nature following Schoolmen's treatises and commentaries on *De Caelo, Physica* and *De Generatione et Corruptione*.

Moving on, they would argue that the listeners' religions were false. Fróis goes on:

*The next step is to discuss those **Japanese sects** to which each individual belongs in order that they can compare their beliefs with what we have told them and can see the difference. Each of the errors must then be refuted with clear-cut proofs so that the people can understand that these beliefs are false.*⁽¹¹⁾

If they could make this acceptable, and only then, the catechists would move on and speak about some points of Christian theology such as the Fall, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and the Last Things:

*Once all these things have been understood, we seek according to the intellectual calibre of each to explain the mystery of **the Trinity, the creation of the world, the fall of Lucifer and the sin of Adam** and from this point we lead to **the Incarnation, the holiness of Christ's life, His death, resurrection and ascension, the power of the mystery of the cross, the Last Judgement, the pains of Hell and the happiness of Heaven.***⁽¹²⁾

When people had accepted all these beliefs, and the listeners expressed their wish to receive baptism, then the Jesuits would proceed to what Fróis called pre-baptismal instruction, which would include instruction on the Ten Commandments and on the meaning of baptism:

*When all these truths have been made clear to the people by means of fixed and standardized sermons that have been prepared in Japanese, additional **pre-baptismal** instruction is given concerning the **Ten Commandments**, the necessity of avoiding their traditional superstitions, their obligation of persevering in the observance of **God's Law**, the meaning and the need for contrition etc. **Baptism** is then administered, but not before its **meaning and necessity** have been explained.*⁽¹³⁾

What is missing in this catechetical scheme that we can find in doctrine instruction and in doctrine manuals? Well, there are a few things. For example, in Catechesis there is no explanation of what prayer is or an exposition of the most common formulas of prayer. Neither is there an exposition on the sacraments or on what are the functions of the priesthood or on the intricacies of the Christian moral code. And, as one last example, there is no reference to transubstantiation.

We can see the same scheme in the Valignano's Japanese Catechism.⁽¹⁴⁾ Here are the headings to its chapters, together with the approximate number of pages of each chapter:

Book 1:

1. In which it is shown that there is an intelligent first principle [18p]
2. Why the Japanese are wrong concerning the first principle [23p]

(10) Translation from Joseph Jennes, *A History of the Catholic Church in Japan*, Tokyo, Oriens Institute for Religious Research, 1973, pp. 22-23.

(11) *Ibid.*

(12) *Ibid.*

(13) *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

(14) Alexandro Valignano, S.J., *Catechismus Christianae Fidei*, Lisbon, Antonius Riberius, 1586.

3. On the human heart not being the same thing as the first principle, as the Japanese teach, from what follows there will be reward or punishment after this life [21p]
4. What the Japanese teach concerning the outward doctrine *gonkyō* 権教 and on the CAMI, FOTOQUE, XACA, AMIDA not having any power in this and in the future life [20p]
5. On the Japanese religions being false and not able to offer salvation [12p]
6. On the Christian religion being promulgated and revealed by God, from which men may attain salvation, and on the reason why faith is necessary [13 1/2p]
7. On there being only one God in three persons; on the creation of the World and on the fall of angels and of men [20p]
8. On how the men born from our first parents felt in several errors; Why the Son of God wanted to be born and suffer [19p]

Book 2:

1. On which the precepts of the law of God are expounded [12p]
2. On which is shown the help we receive to fulfil the law of God, the sacraments [11 ½ p]
3. On the resurrection of the dead and on the Final Judgement [11p]
4. On the glory of Paradise and the punishments in Hell [9p]

As we can see, the first topic of this Catechism was concerned, as we might expect, with the ontological necessity of an intelligent Creator. Afterwards came a presentation of the properties of the human soul. These ideas were then contrasted with the opposite Buddhist conceptions. Because there is an intelligent Creator and because the human soul is spiritual, it follows that there should be life after death, but since Japanese religions hold false views concerning Creation and the nature of the human soul, the argument is made that only Christianity is able to offer true salvation. After this, in chapter 7, the Trinity and the Fall are presented in order. Here, we begin to enter what may be properly called religious ground, but it may be argued that Valignano's catechetical exposition is made from a philosophical or theological high ground that contrasts with the more down to earth and more moral treatment found in doctrines. In chapter 8, there is an explanation for the proliferation of false religions after the Fall of Adam and Eve and on the necessity of humankind to be helped by God in order to be redeemed. Then, in the second book, the Ten Commandments, some of the sacraments, and the last things are presented.

We can contrast this philosophical "nature of things" approach of catechesis to the devotional "how-to" scheme of a doctrine. We see that in a doctrine, symbols and prayers relating to the ordinary life of a Christian are explained with the explicit purpose that Christians may understand better how to believe, how to hope, and what to do. This can be appreciated in titles of the twelve chapters of the Japanese *Dochirina Kirishitan* ドチリナ・キリシタン :

1. [On what it means to be a Christian]
2. On the cross, the Sign of the Christian
3. On the Our Father
4. On the Ave Maria
5. On the Salve Regina
6. On the Creed and the Articles of Faith
7. On the Ten Commandments of God
9. On the Commandments of the Church
10. On the seven mortal sins
11. The seven sacraments of the Church
12. On the other important things to the Christian

The fact that doctrines were used to teach Christians, not pagans, can also be verified from the text of the *Dochirina Kirishitan*. Although there are several passages in the Japanese *Dochirina* from where this can be

deducted, nowhere is it more clearly declared than in its preface. There we can find it plainly stated that the objective for the publication of the book is “to teach to the *Kirishitan* what is essential for attaining salvation in the afterlife”.⁽¹⁵⁾ Furthermore, in the preface it is also stated that common, assessible language is used so that its teachings may be understood by all: “Its language is close to the ears of the people so that all, high and low, may easily comprehend its principles.”⁽¹⁶⁾

These two characteristics of doctrines in general, and of the *Dochirina Kirishitan* in particular, seem to be so important that there is no danger of redundancy repeating them again. The first is that the *Dochirina Kirishitan* was written to teach Christians, not to convert pagans. The second is that the *Dochirina Kirishitan* claims, and we can confirm it, to have been written in a simple, vulgar language so that many people could easily understand it. Therefore, when analyzing a doctrine, for instance the *Dochirina Kirishitan*, it should not be presumed that it was a book directed to teach Christian faith to pagans. If such an assumption is made, all kind of strange and misplaced conclusions will be drawn. On the other hand, catechisms were used to teach pagans, not Christians, and they presented no more than the structural conceptions of the Christian worldview, not its inner doctrines. Consequently, when analyzing a catechism, for example the one authored by Valignano, it should not be presumed that it was to be used as a tool, or as scheme, to teach the faith to Christians.

Therefore, it should not be said that, for example, the Jesuits did not teach the doctrine of the transubstantiation in Japan because it’s not to be found in Valignano’s catechism.⁽¹⁷⁾ It is not found there because a catechism is not the proper place to expound it, not because the Jesuits found it expedient not to teach it to the Japanese. On the other hand, the doctrine of the transubstantiation is indeed to be found in the *Dochirina Kirishitan*, because this is a book for the instruction of the already baptized.

Let us move now to the third point: debates. Together with teaching the catechism to the pagans, the Jesuits also willingly engaged in debates or disputations, concerning this world and the next, with almost anyone wanting to have that kind of conversation with them. Here, the terms “debate” and “disputation” will be used interchangeably.

We can find in the *Nanban* historical sources that there were many types of debates. There were private debates and public debates. Private debates were those where besides the people engaging in the argumentation there were few, if any, onlookers. Some examples of private debates are those between Br. Lourenço and *Yamaxirodono* and *Guequidono*, some of the debates engaged by Vilela in Miyako in 1560, of which we may mention the argument he had with one important unnamed man of letters of *Fiyenoyama* 比叡山, another with five bonzes from Murasaki, and the one with bonze *Quenxu*, and finally the debate between Fabian and Razan. Public debates are probably better known, especially the Yamaguchi disputations, which have already been the object of much scholarly analysis. Besides these, we may also recall the Bungo, Hirado and Azuchi disputations, this last one between Gneccchi-Soldo Organtino (1530—1609) and Nobunaga in 1580, mainly concerning natural phenomena, the existence of God and the human soul.

Sometimes the public debates were requested by the Jesuits, as when Fróis asked Nobunaga, in 1569, to order a disputation between himself and “the most important men of letters of *Fiyenoyama*”, but most often, at least according to Fróis’ *History* and to the letters published by the Jesuits, they would be started by the Buddhist clergy and laymen. There is at least one instance where it was held at the request of Oda Nobunaga, when he “wished once to hear about the things of our law”, writes Fróis, “and to dispute concerning these, proposing many and diverse

(15) 「後世の為に専なることをきりしたんに教へん為に、」 Transcription from the Katsusa edition of 1591, as reproduced in Ebisawa Arimichi; H. Cieslik; Doi Tadao; Ôtsuka Mitsunobu (eds.), *Kirishitan sho Hai-ya sho* 『キリシタン書・排耶書』, Nihon Shisō Taikēi 日本思想大系, Vol. 25, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten Kankō 岩波書店刊行, 1970, pp. 14.

(16) 「上下万民にたやすく此旨を知しめんが為に、言葉は俗の耳に近く、儀は天命のそこを極むる者也。」 *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

(17) There is, however, a short reference to the Eucharist, even if does not make any reference to transubstantiation. See Valignano, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, fl. 10.

questions”.⁽¹⁸⁾

A distinction can also be made between disputations that grew out of catechetical instruction and those that were apologetical from the beginning. The already mentioned debate between Brother Lourenço and *Yamaxirodono* and *Guequidono*, as well as that between Gaspar Vilela and the brother-in-law of the king of Mino⁽¹⁹⁾ may be placed in the first category. The Yamaguchi, Bungo and Azuchi disputations belong to the second.

In the descriptions provided in *Nanban* historical sources, we find that these debates were mainly concerned about the validity of theist philosophical principles and natural philosophy. The main topics mentioned were Creation and the first origin of things, good and evil, the soul and its properties, *Deus*, Man, his origin and destiny, how men are different from animals, angels and demons and their nature, natural phenomena such as earthquakes, winds, stars, eclipses and the like. These were topics that were dealt, at the time, in the philosophy courses of European Universities, and that any Jesuit Father would be thoroughly familiar with. Together with these, topics of a more religious and moral nature such as natural law and the law of God, sin, especially adultery, sodomy and theft, Hell and Heaven, the late transmission of Christian revelation into Japan and the life and works of the *Xaca* also made their appearance in the debates. Here, it may be important to stress again that even these themes of a more religious and moral character are either topics not usually dealt with in the doctrines or, as is the case of Heaven and Hell, seem to have been dealt in debates at a philosophical level that was completely different from that found in doctrines.

In conclusion, evidence can be found in the *Nanban* historical sources for three characteristics of the work of Jesuit missionaries in Japan. One is that they taught catechism to pagans and doctrine to Christians. Therefore, care should be exercised when analyzing a religious manual produced by Jesuits in Japan, because it may have been written either with a doctrinal perspective or be imbued with a catechetical one. One should not expect to find Christian dogma in a catechism, nor philosophical reasonings in a doctrine. Another one is that catechesis proposed a deist framework first, and only when this framework had been accepted would instruction proceed to basic and generic theist and basic Christian theological ideas. Finally, the last one is that debates in sixteenth century between Jesuits and Buddhist monks were mainly about natural philosophy and metaphysics, not about theology and Catholic dogma.

(18) Fróis, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 202.

(19) *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 90.