

Early Jesuit Missionaries in Japan 2

Balthasar Gago and Japanese Christian Terminology

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Though little has been recorded concerning the life and doings of Father Balthasar Gago (c. 1520-1583), his name is important because of his connection with one of the most vexing missionary problems in the Japan of his day. That problem was the question of a Christian terminology, which he sought to provide.



Gago was born in Lisbon about A.D.1520 and devoted himself to grammatical studies for four years "with moderate success." He joined the newly established Society of Jesus in Lisbon in 1546 and was sent to India two years later. When Xavier returned to India in quest of new missionaries, he promptly sent Gago to Japan along with Brothers Alcaçova and de Sylva and the Japanese interpreter, Antonio.

Gago possessed neither the ability nor the training that Xavier would have liked to see in men who were destined to work in university circles and among the bonzes in Japan, but it was felt that he would be able to get a good command of the language and could then act as interpreter for others who would have greater intellectual attainments.

(1) FIRST ENDEAVORS

It was in April 1552 that Gago and his companions set out from Goa. They traveled as far as Malacca with St. Francis Xavier but bade him farewell on June 6 as they entered upon the last lap of the journey that was to take them to Japan. An uneventful voyage brought them to Kagoshima on August 14, and they were cordially welcomed by the daimyo, but they remained in Kagoshima only about one week. A smaller vessel brought them to Bungo, where they arrived on Sept. 7.

The Daimyo, Otomo Yoshishige, immediately assigned them a house and the newcomers went to pay their respects to him on the following day. On this occasion, they also presented the Daimyo with a letter and with various precious gifts from the Viceroy of India at the reception of which Otomo was greatly pleased.

When Father Torres, who was in charge of the mission in Yamaguchi since the departure of St. Francis Xavier, heard of the new missionaries arrival he immediately sent them Brother Fernandez to act as interpreter for them. Accompanied by Fernandez, Father Gago again visited the Daimyo a number of times and spoke to him about Christian doctrine. Otomo listened politely and said that he understood everything very well

although he admitted after his baptism nearly 30 years later that he had understood practically nothing during these earlier conversations. Gago's early visits were not fruitless, however, since the Daimyo promised to provide both a residence and support for the missionaries and gave them official permission to preach the Gospel throughout the province.

Gago was naturally anxious to meet his Superior, Father Torres, and the latter was no less eager to see the new arrivals in order to give them such advice as was needed for their work. The whole group therefore left for Yamaguchi in October and stayed there until after Christmas. The Midnight Mass on the Feast itself was the first Solemn High Mass ever sung on Japanese soil. The Christians had assembled earlier in the evening and spent the whole time listening to sermons and readings from the life of Christ. Thereupon each of the priests said his three Masses and the Christians were told why these three Masses were permitted.

It was not until February that Father Torres sent Father Gago back to Otomo's court in Bungo in company with Brother Fernandez, who was to serve the new priest as assistant and interpreter. Adventure and much useful experience awaited them in Bungo but as yet the missionaries were unaware of it.

Things went very well at first. Gago was admitted immediately to another audience by Otomo, who promised every help and assistance. The daimyo's attitude, no doubt, was dictated largely at this time by his desire for friendly political and commercial relations with the Viceroy of India.

Scarcely had the missionaries settled down to a quiet routine when a violent revolution broke out (February 1553) in Funai (Oita) against the regime of Otomo, and the missionaries had several narrow escapes from death.

Order was quickly restored in the city, but Gago soon found himself involved in a struggle with the Buddhist bonzes. It seems that he had been directed by the Daimyo to take up his residence in the house of one of the bonzes and a large group of them, apparently members of the Zen sect, now gathered there to engage him in debate. Gago, of course, was severely handicapped due to his ignorance of the language, but his interpreter was well accustomed to such encounters and with his help Father Gago acquitted himself so well that the opponents were unable to continue the debate and gave vent to their anger, instead, by abuse and threats.



Some mockingly called him *Deus*, the term which Xavier and Torres had adopted as a Japanese name for God, while others challenged him to show them this 'Deus'. Others again ridiculed the idea of the immortality of the soul and suggested that it might be best to cut Gago's head off and wait to see whether he would come to life again. Not satisfied with these verbal encounters, the opposition finally resorted to throwing stones at the

missionaries' house until the Daimyo intervened and threatened severe punishment for anyone who would continue to molest them.

Changing their tactics, the bonzes now claimed that the "Law of God" was the same as the "Law of Buddha" (*Buppō*) just as all the religions and sects of Japan are, after all, basically the same. They added, therefore, that there was no reason why any one should follow this new religion. Gago, therefore, composed a memorandum in which he pointed out the differences existing between the two 'Laws' or 'Ways' and showed that "only the Law of God is the religion of the Way of Truth". The priest then showed his manuscript to the Daimyo, who not only gave his approval but stamped it with his official seal.

Thanks to the protection thus accorded the mission work in the Province of Bungo also began to show signs of definite progress. In the following year, 1554, Father Gago was able also to begin work in Kutami, some nine miles from Funai; and after baptizing the lord of that district was able likewise to receive no less than 300 of the people into the Church. The report for 1555 shows that the province of Bungo then had no less than 1,000 Catholics.



It was in this same year, 1555, that the Superior, Father Torres asked Father Gago to visit the parish in Hirado, which had about 500 Catholics but which had been without a pastor for several years. Father Gago therefore set out for Hirado in September in company with Brother Fernandez and the lay helper, Paul Tonomine. The report concerning the mission method Gago adopted there is interesting:

The procedure the priest adopted in Hirado was as follows: he began the day by saying Mass for the people. The Christians then recited a number of prayers for the welfare of the Church, the conversion of Japan, etc. On Sundays they heard sermons on the Gospel and on such moral problems as were intelligible to them. During Lent, Brother John Fernandez explained the Our Father and the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar towards which they had a very deep devotion. During Holy Week, the Blessed Sacrament was removed and the people heard a sermon on the *Mandatum*, which was followed by the washing of the feet of twelve poor Christians. Sermons were given in the evening on the Passion of Christ and all of the 150 people who were able to get into the church then proceeded to scourge themselves.

Since the Japanese attach great importance to funeral services, Father Gago was accustomed to say Masses of Requiem throughout the month of November every year in order that the people might focus their attention more on life beyond

the grave. To emphasize the meaning of the *Responsoria*, a catafalque and candles were also set up in the middle of the church and these proved to be a source of great satisfaction to the people. Stress was also placed during this period on sermons concerning the Four Last Things."

Elaborate funeral services held in the province of Bungo were equally fruitful and are said to have been witnessed at times by as many as 3,000 persons.

(2) CHRISTIAN TERMINOLOGY AND THE NEW CATECHISM



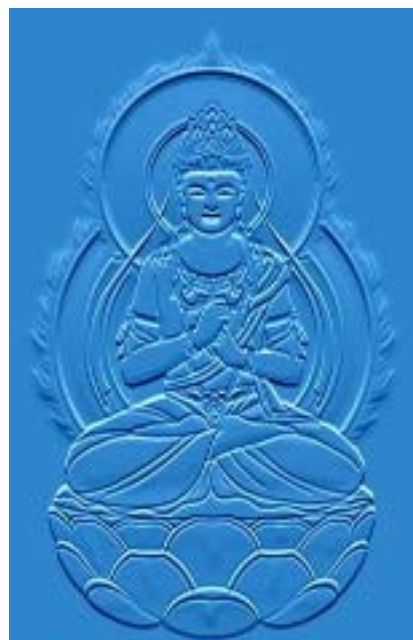
When St. Francis Xavier first began to translate the Creed, the prayers and his doctrinal explanations into Japanese he had to depend entirely on Anjiro for the proper mode of expression. Anjiro had been a member of the Shingon Sect of Buddhism and used the special vocabulary of that sect for the expression of Christian ideas. Unfortunately, Anjiro's knowledge of Buddhism as well as of Christianity was quite limited and it was therefore impossible for him either to grasp the clear-cut distinctions that were to be made in the theology or to create a Christian vocabulary. Xavier, on the other hand, had a very limited knowledge of the language and knew little about Buddhism. It was only in connection with the word *Dainichi* that he became aware of the problem and in that case he simply borrowed the Latin word *Deus* as a name for God in Japanese.

Still more painful surprises were in store for Xavier's successors. Through their repeated disputes with the bonzes and especially through their contact with such bonzes as were received into the Church, they gradually came to understand some of the differences existing between esoteric and exoteric Buddhism. They thus discovered that many of the Buddhist teachings were merely *Hōben*, i.e., convenient simplifications which were regarded as good enough for the masses but were not accepted as true by the bonzes. They found, too, that as a consequence of the double meanings attached to different words, these words were either entirely out of harmony with Christian teaching or were open to misinterpretation. As a result of the radical reform undertaken then by the missionaries, we of today know only a few of the expressions which had been erroneously adopted by the first missionaries. In addition to word 'Dainichi' which had been used and then rejected by Xavier, the early missionaries also used *Hotoke* as a name for God. In speaking of the soul they used the word *Tamashii* which made no distinction between either the vegetative, the sensible, or the rational soul. For 'Paradise' they used the word *Jōdo* and for 'Hell' they used the word *Jigoku* with its current Buddhist connotations. Angels were called *Tennin* and the missionaries were not only referred to publicly as *Sō* (bonzes) but probably applied the term to themselves also while Christian teaching as a whole was referred to as *Buppō*, the 'Law of the Hotoke'.

Since Xavier's catechism was replete with expressions of this sort and since both the priests and Brothers used this terminology in their sermons, it was not surprising that many of the people regarded Christianity as merely another Buddhist Sect that was newly arrived from India.

The official document whereby Ouchi Yoshinaga bestowed the property of the old Daidōji [temple] in Yamaguchi on the missionaries in 1552 tells us that "The bonzes (*Sō*) who have come from the West, in order to preach the Law of Buddha (*Buppō-shōryū no tame*) are hereby authorized to build that temple."

How thoroughly alarmed the missionaries were when they discovered this 'diabolic deception' is revealed in the letters of those days. Action was urgent, and Gago himself indicated two possible courses. One possibility was to take over the Buddhist terms and give them a Christian interpretation (as was done in the domain of ancient Grecian culture) while the second alternative was to retain the foreign terminology. This plan had been followed to a great extent by the missionaries who brought about the conversion of the Germanic peoples. The possibility of forming new, though rather strange combinations of the Chinese characters in order to express Catholic ideas which was later discovered by Father Ricci in China and which would have been a third alternative, had not yet occurred to the missionaries in Japan.



Referring to the terminological changes he had inaugurated, Father Gago himself says in a letter written from Hirado to his confreres in India on Sept. 23, 1555:

The Japanese sects have various technical terms that we also used for a long time to express our theological ideas. As soon as I became aware of the problem, however, I made the necessary changes immediately since using the words of falsehood to express the truth gives a false impression. Whenever I find out, therefore, that a word is harmful, I teach the people the correct Portuguese or Latin word. New things, after all, require new words and the words the people here use have a vastly different connotation from the ideas we want to express.

There are only two possible solutions to the problem, either to make all kinds of explanations with regard to each of these words, or to change the words altogether. This would have to be done in the case of about fifty words.

Now we explain the meaning of those (Buddhist) words along with the errors they contain and then we explain also the meaning of our own correct words. In this way the people come to understand the difference between the two kinds of expressions, understand the doctrine better and recognize also that it is impossible

to use their words to express the truths of God. I mention this in order that those who work among the pagans may weigh their words well when they try to give expression to religious truth.



According to Father Gago, therefore, there were about fifty 'dangerous' words but others were added to the list later with the result that the Catholic books published at that time were replete with foreign words. Father Rodriguez, famed for the grammar he wrote for the Japanese language, later wrote a memorandum on this same subject which was entitled: "On the method of introducing foreign words for those that are lacking in Japanese and on the method of pronouncing them." In this memorandum he wrote:

In view of the fact that words are lacking in the Japanese language to express many of the ideas contained in the Gospel, it is necessary either to invent new words, which is a difficult matter in view of the character of the Japanese language, or to transcribe words of our own and to change them so much that they will seem to belong to the language of the country. Since there are many points of similarity between Japanese and Portuguese both in the matter of syllables and pronunciation, such words can generally be adapted from the Portuguese though some have been taken over from the Latin also. Included among these words, however, are only those which pertain to God, the Saints, virtues and other ideas for which there is no suitable expression in Japanese.

It should be noted also that the Japanese pronounce all of their words as if they were made up of simple syllables comprising only one consonant and one vowel. For 'Padre' they therefore say *Patere*, for 'Natal' they say *Nataru* and for 'Ecclesia' they say *Yequerejia*. When writing these words in the Western alphabet, however, it is better to write them in their original form rather than in this Japanese transcription.

It was only natural that such a radical reform led to something of a crisis for the young Japanese mission. "Some of the neophytes left the Church saying that they had been deceived since they thought that in accepting Christianity they were adopting a religion that was in harmony with the teachings of Shaka and Amida Others, however, remained faithful to their new-found Faith." (Nunez)

At any rate, the lines of battle were now clearly defined and there was no longer any danger of confusing Buddhism with Christianity. The Christians seem to have become accustomed to the new words quickly enough so that mission work was not rendered much more difficult. Touching upon this subject sixty years later, Father Camillo Costanzo said that "everybody was so well satisfied that even the pagans used these words

to express Christian ideas and the Christians were happy to know the terminology we ourselves use."

It is clear from Gago's own report that his reform had been completed as early as 1555, i.e., during the time when he was still active in Bungo. This reform was approved by the Provincial, Father Melchior Nunez, when he visited Japan in the following year. The question of religious terminology was thus definitely decided for the early Church in Japan and it was decided along the lines indicated by St. Francis Xavier.

A new task now confronted the missionaries. Up to that time they had used Xavier's catechism but this had either to be revised completely or it had to be replaced by a completely new catechism. Father Nunez, who is listed as an outstanding theologian in the contemporary catalogues of the Society of Jesus, not only ordered the publication of a completely new catechism but also composed the first draft of the book during the four months he spent in Japan. Father Gago, who had meanwhile been transferred to Hirado (1555), completed this work and translated it into Japanese with the help of Brother Lourenco, the Japanese lay Brother. The work was completed some time during 1557 or 1558 and was popularly known as *Ni-ju-ka-jo*, because it was divided into twenty-five chapters. It was destined to serve as the standard textbook and as the basis of all catechetical instruction for the next two decades.



(3) LAST YEARS IN JAPAN--RETURN TO INDIA

The year 1558 was an eventful one for Father Gago. Otomo Yoshishige, the Daimyo of Bungo, had offered the missionaries land and the means of subsistence in the rising city of Hakata (Fukuoka) for the purpose establishing a mission there. Father Gago was chosen for the establishment of this mission while Father Gaspar Vilela who had arrived in Japan with Father Nunez was appointed to take Gago's place in Hirado. Father Gago also obtained an assistant for Hakata in the person of Brother Guilherme Pereira.

The missionaries had just completed their house and chapel in Hakata and were beginning regular mission work in 1559 when trouble broke out, and the city was occupied by rebels after fighting that had lasted only one day. In order to save the Church furnishings, Brother Fernandez had been ordered to set sail with them for Hirado while Father Gago and Brother Pereira sought refuge on another ship.

As soon as the captain of this ship saw, however, that the city had fallen, he proceeded to rob the missionaries of all their possessions and threatened to surrender them to their enemies. After four days, he carried out this threat with the result that the missionaries were robbed even of the clothes they were wearing and they were not only exposed in their nakedness to the bitter cold but were roughly man-handled. It was only when they returned to Hakata that a kindly non-Christian who knew Father Gago, gave him a Japanese kimono.

After several days of critical uncertainty, the missionaries found a refuge in the home of a Christian and remained hidden there for fifty days. The Christians of Hirado as well as those of Hakata sent them clothing and other provisions in such abundance that Father Gago could say that no priests of the Society of Jesus had ever been as well cared for as they were in these days of persecution.

The danger was not yet over, however, for it seems that the rebels wanted to hold the missionaries as hostages in order to extort guns and ammunition from the Portuguese. The Christians therefore resorted to a trick in order to save the situation. The missionaries were decked out in women's clothing and large straw hats and were enabled, thanks to this disguise, to make their way into the suburbs where horses were waiting to take them to safety in Funai.

Welcomed there with much ado by the Christians, the missionaries were able to get a well-earned rest but Father Gago's health seems to have suffered considerably. Since somebody had to go to India in the following year to talk over mission problems with Father Nunez, Gago was chosen for this assignment.

Father Frois gives us an eyewitness account of the cordial send-off the Funai Christians gave the departing missionary.

As soon as the Christians learned of his impending departure, those in the neighborhood as well as some who lived at a distance of nine miles came to bid farewell while others who lived at a distance of 30 or 40 miles wrote letters to explain why they could not come in person. The farewell ceremonial was as follows:



A group of people from the same village or street bring wine and fruit and line up in accordance with the rules of etiquette. The one who is to serve the refreshments stands in the middle holding a cup (*sakazuki*). After a series of complimentary speeches, the priest drinks first and then hands the cup to the oldest or most esteemed of the visitors who then passes it on to the others until all have partaken of the wine. So numerous were the visitors that the church and courtyard combined were too small to accommodate them. The people wept for grief but Father Gago sought to console them by telling them that it was to the best interests of all that he should go to India to bring additional priests to Japan. A large crowd of men, women and children insisted on following him for a considerable distance after he had left the church and would not go back until he himself paused and told them he would not proceed until they had returned to their homes. Even then some followed him for a mile or so before he could persuade them to turn back.

The sea voyage was extremely rough due to many storms, and on several occasions the ship was in imminent danger of sinking or of being captured by pirates. It was not until the end of January, 1561, that Father Gago reached Malacca whence he continued on to India.



Due to the unsatisfactory condition of his health, Father Gago was never sent back to Japan but was given an easier assignment on the island of Chorao near Goa. Later he also worked in the Rachol mission on the island of Salsette, where

he had the misfortune on one occasion of falling into enemy hands. He died in Goa in 1583.

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Fr. Hubert Cieslik, S.J. was born in 1914 and died in 1988. One of the most respected historians of Japanese Christianity, he has written numerous books and articles on Japanese Church in German, English, and Japanese. He wrote the present article for an English journal—now extinct—in Japan sometime around 1954. Fr. Cieslik's printed articles were compiled by Francis Mathy, S.J., Ph.D. The digital version was prepared, edited, and composed for PDF by Francis Britto, S.J., Ph.D.