

The Battle of the Books: Christian and Anti-Christian Tracts in the Early Seventeenth Century

Ikuko Midzunoe

(An article from Francis Britto's *All about Francis Xavier*)

While Elizabethan England was enjoying the flowering of Renaissance culture, the Japanese were living in the midst of social upheavals, each feudal lord trying to conquer “the world” and often supplanted by his inferior. This politically turbulent age, in other words “the age of civil wars,” was also an age of futility from the viewpoint of traditional religion and literature. The ruling class resorted to Buddhism and Confucianism for their moral standards. Ordinary people must have wanted to find some meaning to life, as one missionary reported in 1585 that unbelievably great numbers of pilgrims from all over the country were surging to worship at the Ise Shrine. Nevertheless such traditional religions on the whole, it seems, failed to offer the hoped for consolations. For instance, even *Kirishitan Monogatari*, an anti-Christian chapbook, accused Buddhist priests of their lamentable behavior:

How different are the habits of Japanese monks from the customs of South Barbary! Japanese monks fawn upon their parishioners. They crave after fame and fortune and are sunk in lust. Bereft of merciful compassion, they are given to unfeeling covetousness. From their high thrones they preach, “Cast off all desire!”—but what others cast off they contrive to pick up again.¹

As for literature, the situation was a sort of vacuum in contrast to the abundant results of the previous and following ages. Against such a background remarkable Christian publications were produced by the Jesuit mission press, despite Toyotomi Hideyoshi's decree of 1587 for the expulsion of all missionaries.

The books and pamphlets, known collectively as *Kirishitan-ban*, were produced in a wide variety and included not only such religious works as liturgical manuals and catechisms but also language books and miscellaneous literary works written in Japanese or translated for the first time into Japanese. They were printed either in *romaji* or in Japanese script, and were obviously collaborations of Jesuit missionaries with Japanese brothers. Among such brothers was one called Fucan Fabian, whose name was printed in the romanized version of the great 13th century classic *Heike Monogatari* (“The Tale of the Heike”) as its editor. Fabian explained in



1. Toyotomi Hideyoshi

his editor's preface, dated 10 December 1593, that it was compiled for the benefit of European Jesuits studying the Japanese language and history and that it was therefore abridged and simplified by him. He was probably also associated with the compilation of two other works in the same volume, *The Kinkushū*—a collection of homiletic maxims and a translation of *The Tales of Aesop*. Then, in 1605, in Kyoto he published a book written by himself under the title *Myōtei Mondō*—a dialogue in the form of questions and answers between two Japanese nuns, Myoshu and Yutei, whose names are reflected in the title.

This book, *The Myotei Dialogue*, is a long and laborious work to justify Christianity against traditional Japanese religions. In the postscript the author says that the book was intended for the wives and widows of those of high social status who could not freely visit *Nanbanji* ('the temple of the southern barbarians' literally translated, and in fact a Christian temple) to study Christian doctrine. Myoshu, a non-Christian novice who asks the questions, is supposed to have a Confucian father and to be well acquainted with Japanese ways of thinking—both intellectual and popular. Yutei, a Christian, answers each question with considerable eloquence and rhetoric. Although it was once regarded as an original work by



Fabian, later research has revealed that the book is closely based on Alexander Valignano's catechism especially arranged for missions in Japan. Valignano insisted on the need for the missionaries to adapt to local customs and ways of thought if their missions were to establish themselves in Japanese society. For this reason he imported a printing press to produce textbooks and dictionaries not only to teach but also to learn. His policy was sharply opposed to that of the former superior, Cabral, but was in harmony with the original plans set out by Francis Xavier.

2. Valignano

Fabian, the author of *Myōtei Mondō*, was born in or near Kyoto in 1565. He is said to have been an apprentice-bonze (*kozō*) in a temple because of his humble origin; according to another view his mother was of samurai birth and an intimate of Kita no Mandokoro, wife of Hideyoshi. In any case, he spent his early years in a Zen temple, possibly Daitokuji, but was converted to Christianity in his late teens. In 1586, at the age of 21, he was admitted into the Society of Jesus as a lay brother and received theological and humanistic training and acquired a knowledge of Latin. Without doubt Valignano's catechism mentioned above was used for such education, in addition to the authoritative Buddhist scriptures and philosophical works brought by converted Buddhists like himself in order to refute them more effectively. Fabian's name appears among those who joined the second Jesuits' conference held in Kazusa in 1590, and by 1592 he was teaching Japanese at the college in Amakusa, while being involved in the mission press.

A well-trained Christian with a Buddhist background and a good command of the language, Fabian was well suited to write the first ever written argumentative defense of Christianity in Japan. The work consists of three parts. Part 1 is a refutation of Buddhism. It had been long missing but was rediscovered and substantiated as its transcribed manuscript,

although it is not in the form of dialogue. Part 2 deals with Confucianism and Shintoism, and Part 3 makes an exposition of Christian doctrine.

Fabian maintains that according to Buddhism, all is null: all phenomena come to nothing, and so does Buddha. That is, Buddhism, in the final analysis, resolves itself into void. Next, from the Confucian point of view, everything can be explained by the principles of Yin and Yang, the negative and positive, the Great Ultimate being their basis, the state before Yin and Yang divided. Thus, the Great Ultimate bereft of wisdom and will cannot function constructively of itself. In fact, what Confucianism can offer is a set of fundamental principles that can be used by human beings. Examining three Shinto sects one by one, then, he concludes that its mysterious element is nothing but a paraphrase of Confucian Yin and Yang theories and that the deities of Shintoism, having appeared subsequent to the creation of the world, are, in truth, men and women.

Such arguments could have been basically provided at the college or novitiate which he was attached to, and the following exposition of Christianity seems to be characteristic of the missionaries of the time, in stressing God the Creator who created everything out of nothing, who is spiritual substance, sapience, mercy, justice and omnipotence, and in thus trying to make a clear distinction between the Christian God and all the traditional Japanese gods. Although the Incarnation is briefly mentioned, other essential concepts such as the Holy Trinity and the Redemption are neglected, and the arguments always come back to God the Creator in *Myōtei Mondō*. The difference of the object of worship is of primal importance.

Lack of knowledge and ability prevents my further exploration of this kind of doctrinal discussion. However, it seems interesting to notice, for one, the humble and simple feeling that Myoshu expresses now and again, and, for another, the way Yutei tries to demythologize traditional religious myths. For instance, Myoshu says, "Thinking of this vast heaven and earth, it seems unlikely that there is a creator, and at the same time it seems that there are a lot of creators." Perhaps a typically Japanese reaction to the universe, vague and pantheistic, can be seen here. Yutei, on the other hand, refutes Buddhist metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul, from an individualistic Christian viewpoint.

She then applies creation theory to demythologize Shinto creation myths. That is, she reinterprets them via Yin and Yang, the negative and positive, and, ultimately, the male and female principles. For Yutei, the superficial and vulgar character of Shintoism is apparent in considering the sequence of deities as stages in the process of sexual generation. Here Fabian is very sophisticated, making use of sexual symbolism and arriving at a refutation of Shintoism itself. Thus he invites Myoshu's response:



3. Torii (Gate) of a Shinto Shrine

How right you are, how right!... If one takes the statements of Shinto at face value, they are absurd. When one hears the hidden meaning, one is embarrassed.... How foolish of me! I really did think that this country was born as issue from Izanami and Izanagi.²

In 1606, Fabian was visited by a young Confucian scholar, Hayashi Razan, with his younger brother and his friend Matsunaga Teitoku. At the time Hayashi Razan was twenty-four years old and was already becoming known for his learning of Neo-Confucianism, and soon afterwards was appointed as an adviser at court. Highly conscious of his own talents, he confronted Fabian. The account of this occasion was written up as a short essay entitled "*Haiyaso*," *hai* meaning to eliminate and *yaso* Christianity or the Jesuits, dated 15 June 1606. Chronologically, this is the first of the so-called *Haiyasho*, written refutations of Christianity, *hai* and *ya* (omitting *so*) meaning the same as the above and *sho* meaning books, but it was not published until 1671. Fabian's *Hadaiusu* ('The Refutation of Deus'), *ha* meaning to refute and *daiusu* 'Deus,' is dated 16 January 1620, and therefore can be said to be the first that appeared. I will come back to this later.

In "*Haiyaso*," Razan criticized *Myōtei Mondō* as completely worthless:

... now they (Myoshu and Yutei) talk about Confucianism and Shinto; not one thing worth looking at. All of it is patched together in the most plebeian Japanese: wild, hysterical imprecations and abuse.³

Having read Matteo Ricci and prepared himself for the meeting, Razan asks Fabian about the Christian idea of creation, and states that "to have a beginning and to have no end: this is impossible." In fact, for Razan, everything that Fabian insists, including Western scientific ideas obviously taught by the missionaries, is impossible. In the end, Fabian is described as "mad and arrogant," but by that description, it seems, the writer himself is also projected as mad and arrogant. This was not, then, an encounter of two minds, but rather shows a real difficulty in bridging two minds, each dogmatically convinced of its righteousness and unwilling to listen to the other.

Fabian's history after this interview is not well known except that he published the above-mentioned *Hadaiusu* in 1620. Fabian says in its preface that some fifteen years have passed since he left the Jesuits. Calculating backwards, then, it is assumed that he became a renegade from Christianity soon after his meeting with Hayashi Razan. What made him abandon his Christian faith has been variously guessed at. In the last part of the book Fabian complains of the ways he was treated by the Society, especially about his not being promoted to the priesthood. That may have been one factor, but is not very convincing. Some missionary's report ascribes it to a love-affair. It is intriguing to suppose



4. A Stamp honoring Matteo Ricci, S.J.

this, but it seems to remain fruitless speculation as well. Again in the preface he confesses that his friend remonstrated with him, saying as follows:

Before, you learned all about the cursed faith of Deus; take pen in hand now, commit your knowledge to writing, and counter their teachings. Not only will you thereby gain the merit of destroying wickedness and demonstrating truth; you will also supply a guide toward new knowledge.⁴

Thus he decided to write *Hadaiusu*, which was often referred to in later anti-Christian publications that followed one after another during the seventeenth century. Incidentally, most of these anti-Christian publications were in the form of then-developing *kanazōshi*, stories for amusement such as war-stories and horror stories, to inculcate in the uneducated what were considered to be the evils and absurdities of Christianity. *Kirishitan Monogatari* ('The Story of Christians') features Fabian as an apostate Zen monk and a



5. Seated Shinto God
(www.metmuseum.org)

Christian sorcerer. In *Nambanji Kōhaiki* ('The Rise and Fall of the Temple of the Southern Barbarians'), he appears as a convert indoctrinating ignorant fools. Other intellectual tracts were all published after Christianity was strictly prohibited and all Christians were either banished or persecuted. But it is strange that no such written refutation was published during the two decades when so many Christian books were produced.

Taking the current of the times into consideration, it is no wonder that Fabian produced a testimony to his conversion, presenting it directly to the *shōgun*. At about the time when he published *Myōtei Mondō*, Tokugawa Ieyasu was tolerant towards Christianity because of his great desire to foster foreign trade. He regarded the Jesuits as essential

intermediaries, although he restricted their mission only to the middle and lower classes. However, the arrival of the Dutch in 1609 and of the English in 1613 complicated the situation, with their trade breaking the Portuguese monopoly and allowing Ieyasu to act against the missionaries. His confrontation with Hideyori, son of the late Hideyoshi, helped Ieyasu turn against Christianity, because of a strong Christian tendency in Hideyori's territory.

The road to prohibition and persecution quickly opened. In 1612, Christianity was officially prohibited by the Tokugawa Shogunate; in 1614, the expulsion edict for padres was proclaimed and persecution started in all quarters. Fabian seems to have been desperately in need of defending himself. He wrote: "Every morning I have lamented my desertion of the Great Holy True Law; every evening I have grieved over my adherence to the crooked path of the barbarians."

Myōtei Mondō tried its best to establish that only one true Lord possessed the quality to be the source of creation. *Hadaiusu* is an exhaustive attempt to refute it. There are seven

steps in *Hadaiusu* to reject the dialogue's propositions, and in each step Fabian first presents what Christians claim and then he replies in order to refute it. In the first step he deals with God the Creator; in the second, with human souls as rational and immortal; in the third, the Creation and Fall of the Angels; in the fourth, the creation of the first parents and Original Sin; in the fifth, contrition and atonement; in the sixth, the Life of Christ; in the last, the Ten Commandments and the Sacraments.



6. Titian *Fall of Adam & Eve*

In his refutation, he declares that Japan is the Land of the Gods and also of the Buddhas. He points out the fact that so many Christian lords lost their lives or property and insists that Deus cannot be almighty. Eternal punishment is against God's mercifulness. The Fall of the Angels is incompatible with God's omniscience. Man's original sin for eating an apple is ridiculous, etcetera. Just as *Myōtei Mondō* pivoted on God the Creator, so this attack emphasizes the first Commandment. "Thou shall worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." Here George Elison, who translated *Hadaiusu* into English as *Deus Destroyed*, finds that Japanese words, *banji ni koe* meaning "above all things," are inserted in *Hadaiusu*, whereas in *Myōtei Mondō* they are not to be found, and Elison regards this as a crucial instance of purposeful manipulation. Although it is not inconsistent with Christian doctrine, Fabian's stress is hardly accidental and serves the idea of Christianity as a great threat to the feudalistic system of society and the hegemony of the Tokugawa Shogunate itself. As he says,

The first commandment urges disobedience to the orders of the sovereign or father if compliance would mean denial of Deus's will; it entreats one to hold life itself cheap in such a situation. In this respect lurks the intention to subvert and usurp the country, to extinguish Buddha's Law and Royal Sway. Quick, quick! Put this gang in stocks and shackles!... The spread of such a cursed doctrine is completely the working of the devil.⁵

Yutei explains the active and personal God with joy and a tinge of superiority in her belief in *Myōtei Mondō*. In *Hadaiusu* Fabian himself repudiates the idea with zeal: a personal creator is a creator with an ego; a prime mover with a will is a willful prime mover, and hence an apersonal, immanent organizational force in the universe was upheld. In the latter tract he advocates what he rejected in the former, what was more, with the same arguments. There are no traces of spiritual development in the latter: he just switches positions. Consequently, the reason why he could not stand until the end is indiscernible in the text. Paradoxically, that could be the very reason for his apostasy: his Christianity was an intellectual undertaking. The battle of the books here was a battle fought within a person, but it was also symbolic of a larger context. Namely, it suggests an extreme difficulty in making real the encounter of East and West in Early Modern Japan.

¹⁻⁵The texts (1-5) are quoted from George Elison's translation included in his *Deus Destroyed: the Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*. (Harvard U. P., 1973).

Image Credits

Fig. *Seated Shinto God*, late Heian period (ca. 900–1185), 10th century Sculpture; Japanese cypress (hinoki), with traces of color H: 20 5/8 in. (52.5 cm). Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation at Metropolitan Museum of Art < <http://www.metmuseum.org>>

© Peter Milward, 2005. Weblished with the explicit permission of Milward and the author, Prof. Midzunoe. All Rights Reserved. Solely for private use. Not to be edited or altered without permission. Not to be reproduced for any commercial purpose whatsoever. Free distribution is permitted. Contact <francisbritto[At]hotmail.com> for details

Professor Ikuko Midzunoe is the Head of the Faculty of International Relations at Kyoritu Women's University.

[Brittonia](#)

[SJ_Europe](#)

[Francis Xavier](#)

[SJWeb](#)

[SJ_Japan](#)

[Top](#)