

Re-thinking Christianity in Japan



A stunning 40 years have passed since George Alison submitted the PhD thesis which became the basis for his 1973 book *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*. Since then, our understanding of the Japanese Christian century or the fate of Christianity in the Tokugawa Period has not been seriously challenged by new Western-language publications. The image of Christianity in Japan between 1550 and 1850 presented to us in Alison's work, and by and large shared by the profession over the last decades, has been Christianocentric not only because the narrative was informed largely through reliance on Jesuit sources, but also in the sense that there has never been any doubt that historical documents from that period dealing with Christianity were in fact about, well, Christianity.

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IN HIS NEW STUDY, KIRI PARAMORE has set out to radically revise this view by arguing that the bulk of Tokugawa period writing on Christianity was in fact hardly concerned with actual Christians. Instead, 'the key political and ideological drivers for anti-Christian writing lay not in some clash between Eastern and Western religions and cultures, but in concrete conflicts occurring in domestic Japanese politics' (p. 5). Paramore further narrows down these 'concrete conflicts' to one major confrontation he sees at work in most of the texts he analyses. Put simply, this was the clash between a position arguing for individual autonomy and the conservative argument for externalised hierarchical sociopolitical relations. The surprising twist in Paramore's narrative is that he sees Christians as well as Confucians (and later Buddhists) on both sides of the fence.

Thus, he sets out in his chronological treatment of political ideology in Japan between 1600 and 1900 by painting a portrait of Japanese Christian thought around 1600 as doctrinally diverse (Chapter 1). While the Jesuit text *Myōtei mondō* by Habian (also known as Fabian Fukan) construed human ethics as based on the individual's capacity to discern right and wrong, the contemporaneous *Dochirina kirishitan*, produced under the supervision of Alessandro Valignano, emphasised original sin and faith as the main road to the afterlife, thereby diminishing the role of human agency in attaining salvation. In Chapter 2, Paramore then parallelises these insights with his analysis of the thought of Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan, discovering 'surprising points of similarity' (p. 37). The difference between the two early Japanese Confucian thinkers is set in terms of 'individual vs. institution' (p. 39). Seika, structurally similar to Habian, stressed human agency in his interpretation of the Confucian practice of 'the investigation of things' (*kakubutsu*). Razan, in contrast, stressed an external, preexisting, and predetermined paradigm, which rendered individual knowledge useless in the process of attaining truth. Interestingly, Paramore is able to link these positions to broader sociopolitical developments at the time: 'the social conditions of Japan at this time [...] appeared to support intellectual approaches that placed emphasis on autonomous human (often spiritual) practice. [...] As the early seventeenth century progressed, however, a new more stabilized political situation emerged [...] and structures of orthodoxy and heterodoxy capable of ordering intellectual traditions in

an authoritarian framework began to emerge' (pp. 41-42). Paramore also situates Habian's post-apostasis *Hadaiusu* in these new circumstances. In 1620, Habian no longer defined the principles of nature as discernable by the human mind but rather 'as something immanent in the sociopolitical order' (p. 49).

Anti-Christianity without Christians

In Chapters 3 to 5, Paramore turns to the period in which actual Christians had ceased to constitute a real threat but, seemingly paradoxically, anti-Christian rhetoric did not subside. In searching for the anti-Christian theme, Paramore examines a number of texts of differing provenance. Beginning with the bakufu's *Bateren tsuihō no fumi*, these are, first, political texts such as edicts or diplomatic documents. Secondly, he deals with what he calls 'populist texts' such as the mid 17th century anonymous *Kirishitan monogatari* and Suzuki Shōsan's *Hakirishitan*. Thirdly, he deals extensively with writings from the high thought tradition, in particular works authored by Hayashi Razan and Kumazawa Banzan (Chapter 4) and Arai Hakuseki, Ogyū Sorai, Miura Baien and adherents of the Mito School (Chapter 5). Paramore's main argument in these chapters is that '[t]hrough the 1640s, 1650s and 1660s, anti-Christian discourse becomes gradually less related to the question of Christianity in contemporary Japan' (p. 101). Instead, as Paramore shows in some detail, Hayashi Razan used 'anti-Christian discourse' to attack his rival in competition for the bakufu's attention Kumazawa Banzan. Banzan is portrayed by Paramore, in a manner reminiscent of how he had described Habian and Seika, as having favoured 'immanent knowledge [...] over knowledge authenticated by an externalized order' (p. 99). Razan, in contrast, advocated a 'Shinto-Confucian orthodoxy' (p. 100) and thus perceived Banzan as a threat to that orthodoxy, slandering his thought as 'just a mutation of Christianity' (p. 95). While Paramore's two arguments about the difference in opinion between Razan and Banzan and about the changed referent of anti-Christian rhetoric is convincing, the reader is left wondering whether the anti-Christian element which Razan employs in few and isolated instances really constitutes a 'discourse' of its own. It might just as easily be interpreted as a metaphor for a particularly dangerous heterodoxy, which had by the second half of the 17th century lost most of its original, specific meaning.

While Razan was not apt to showing a genuine interest in the doctrine of that Christianity he spoke so deridingly about, later Tokugawa period writers such as Hakuseki and Aizawa Seishisai made efforts to delve more deeply into the foreign creed. In one of the strongest passages of the book, Paramore shows

how both Hakuseki and Seishisai relied on the same crucial political argument in denouncing Christianity as heterodoxical, namely the opportunity it opens up for the individual believer to directly address a transcendent god, thereby circumventing the earthly authorities. In this way, argued Hakuseki and Seishisai, Christian teachings upset the five (Confucian) relations and especially the relationship between ruled and ruler (pp. 108 and 120).

Modern continuities

Paramore, however, takes the discussion beyond Edo times by extending it into the modern period. His analysis of the Imperial Rescript on Education and writings by Inoue Enryō and Inoue Tetsujirō leads him to conclude that the late 19th century anti-Christian discourse diverged from that of just a few decades earlier in not being anti-Western anymore. Instead, the two Inoues resorted to the framework of Western philosophy, and more specifically conservative traditions such as Spencerian social organism theory or early Neo-Kantian philosophy, in attacking Christianity. While Paramore acknowledges this break, he also sees a continuity from the Tokugawa period 'in the use of the Christian issue to argue against liberalism and egalitarianism in the early 1890s' (p. 163).

Paramore's study convincingly presents a highly original argument and corroborates this argument by adducing a host of both well-known sources (references to volumes of the *Nihon shisō taikei* series are copious) and more unusual ones such as diplomatic correspondence of the 1620s and 1630s (pp. 70-75) or two little known texts by Hayashi Razan on rebellions plots in 1651 and 1652 (pp. 87-98). Furthermore, the strongly focused narrative contains such philological gems as an extended discussion of the dating of Razan's *Haiyaso* (pp. 66-70), not to speak of the many original translations contained within the text.

Three reservations, however, should be mentioned at the end. First, Paramore claims to have 'presented the first comprehensive study which demonstrates links between the anti-Christian writings of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries' (p. 161). This claim is somewhat painful to accept for a German-language reader who is aware of Monika Schrimpf's 2000 study *Zur Begegnung des japanischen Buddhismus mit dem Christentum* ('On the Encounter Between Japanese Buddhism with Christianity'). Schrimpf, whose work Paramore does not refer to, in fact treats both Tokugawa-period and Meiji-period anti-Christian tracts and comes to the conclusion that Tokugawa-period writers had focused less on doctrinal divergences in their anti-Christian texts than on 'interpreting them with regard to their political meaning' (p. 195), a discursive move which Schrimpf sees at work in the 19th century as well, thus coming reasonably close to Paramore's main point.

Second, different from the ease with which Paramore treats authors associated with the Christian and Confucian traditions, he does not seem to feel equally at home with Buddhism. His portrayal of the Jōdo priest Kiyū Dōjin (also known as Ugai Tetsujō) as virtually unknown in academia (pp. 124-125) seems somewhat out of place considering that texts by Tetsujō have in fact been included (and commented upon) in the major collections of Meiji-period Buddhist writing since the 1970s and that he has received a fair amount of attention as leader of the supra-confessional *Shoshū dōtoku kaimei* by leading scholars of Meiji-period Buddhism such as Ikeda Eishun or Kashiwahara Yūsen. Equally, Paramore confesses surprise about the continuity of Buddhist thinking about the state beyond the divide of the Meiji Restoration (pp. 126-127), although proper contextualisation of the two Buddhist texts he briefly quotes would render any sense of surprise obsolete. Seen in the context of the massive corpus of anti-Christian writings by Buddhists in the *bakumatsu* period, it is rather obvious that Buddhist writers would not have abandoned their well-established logic of 'protecting the dharma is protecting the nation' (*gohō soku gokoku*) over the course of only a few years.

The last point of criticism has to be directed towards the publisher. Not only does Routledge charge the usual outrageous 75 pounds sterling for a 230-page book, but for that price the reader does not even get the full expected value: Paramore presents only a 'shortened bibliography', 'due to space constraints' (p. 200).

None of this, however, diminishes the worth of this well-written and provocative study, which not only significantly adds to our understanding of Japanese political ideology between 1600 and 1900, but indeed forces us to rethink a number of boundary drawings which we have grown accustomed to such as those between Confucianism and Christianity, East and West, or conservative and progressive.

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Fig. 1 (above)
Japanese Christian
stepping blocks
bearing wood
carving of the Virgin
Mary, were set in
the ground by
persecutors.
Christians were
hanged for refusing
to walk on them.
Photograph by
Alfred Eisenstaedt.
February 1942. Life.
Courtesy of Time inc.

Fig. 2 (below)
St Francis Xavier.
Believed to
have introduced
Christianity to Japan.

