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'The Best Thus Far Discovered': The Japanese in the Letters of Francisco Xavier.

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"THE BEST THUS FAR DISCOVERED": THE JAPANESE IN THE LETTERS OF FRANCISCO XAVIER

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On August 15, 1549, Francisco Xavier, along with two other Spanish Jesuits, three Japanese converts, and two servants, arrived in the harbor of Kagoshima on the Japanese island of Kyūshū. Thus, he launched a brief period of missionary activity that climaxed in 1597 with the crucifixion of six Spanish Franciscans and twenty Japanese Christians, and ended in the early seventeenth century with the expulsion of all foreign missionaries and the closure of Japan to the West. Xavier, revered in western Christendom as the "Apostle of the Indies and Japan," was one of the first European observers of Japanese life.[1] In a series of letters to his co-religionists in India and Europe he recounts his journey to Japan, providing the early modern West with a window onto Marco Polo's fabled Zipangu while documenting for posterity the process through which Europe gradually

[1] Marco Polo was the first European to mention Japan (Zipangu) in his writings, though he never visited the country. The first contact between Japanese and Europeans possibly occurred in 1511 (Boxer v: 14-15). The first Europeans to reach Japan's shores were Portuguese traders, who arrived in either 1542 or 1543 (Boxer v: 15-18). One of these was Jorge Álvares. Xavier had Álvares record his observations of Japanese geography and society and sent them to Europe for publication. This was the earliest account of Japan to gain wide circulation in the West. It is reproduced by Izawa (240-57).

asserted itself over the non-European world. In fact these letters reveal as much about mid-sixteenth-century Europe, in the throes of religious reformation and imperialist expansion, as about Japan itself. Yet they are also a kind of autobiography in which Xavier not only chronicles his extraordinary experiences but attempts to fashion a personal identity through and in opposition to what in subsequent Western discourse would become the very limit—both geographical and conceptual—of the Orient.

In his letters Xavier balances his discussion of Christianity by presenting the theological questions and doubts raised by his Japanese audiences. However, he denounces Buddhist monasticism with a zealousness exceptional even in a churchman of the Counter Reformation. In his judgment the *bonzes* (Buddhist monks) are avaricious, parasitical, and hypocritical. What is more, they are sexually profligate: some have relations with nuns, who regularly induce abortions, and most are practicing sodomites. Yet even though Xavier inveighs against Japanese religion and morality, he expresses great admiration for the Japanese people as a whole, enthusiastically declaring that they are "la mejor que hasta aguora está descubierta."[2] Xavier claims the Japanese exceed all non-Europeans through their goodness, honor, and politeness, and also because they are a "gemte bramqua" [white people] (letter 96, 277) and as such naturally predisposed to Christian conversion.[3] By defining the Japanese as inherently superior, he implicitly establishes himself, and by extension Europe, as the ultimate arbiter of human worth. But in so doing he also validates indigenous Japanese culture, which for the most part remained intact despite his dreams of conversion and the economic and military designs of the West until well into the nineteenth century.

Xavier was a prodigious traveler, even for his age, but not a prolific writer. Born in 1506 in what was then a Basque-speaking

[2] Schurhammer and Wicki, letter 90, 186. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from this source. Letter numbers and pages are indicated in parentheses. All translations are mine.

[3] Contemporary Japanese-American activists speak of the United States's "racist love" of Japanese Americans, which posits them as a "model minority." This attitude aligns Japanese-Americans with whites, thereby erasing cultural differences while simultaneously maintaining them in a position of alterity.

region of Navarre,[4] he journeyed across Europe to Paris, where he studied theology with Iñigo de Loyola; then to Rome to participate in the foundation of the Jesuit order; and finally to Lisbon, to spearhead the Portuguese evangelization of the East Indies. From there, he made his way as a missionary to Africa, India, the Spice Islands, and Japan, reaching the easternmost point of his peregrinations at the Japanese imperial capital of Kyōto. While in Japan, he wrote five letters in which he detailed his experiences and comments on Japanese life. Although the letters were addressed to the Portuguese mission in Goa, India, they were written mostly in Spanish, probably because Xavier's secretary at the time knew only that language.[5] Several more letters dating from before and after Xavier's Japanese sojourn also contain important information about Japan. They were written in either Spanish or Portuguese.[6] A total of 137 letters still remain from Xavier's entire correspondence. This constitutes his literary legacy, though according to Ignacio Elizalde, Xavier possibly composed several poems and dramas.[7] As Elizalde further demonstrates, Xavier wrote in a plain, unadorned Spanish, comparable in its simplicity to the spontaneous style of Teresa de Jesús, albeit even more imperfect than hers because of his long absence from Spain and his constant exposure to other languages (47-48).[8] In contrast to Teresa and other writers within Spain, Xavier influenced Spanish literature not through his own writing but the example he set in life, which became the subject of much Golden Age drama and poetry. Moreover, he may also have influenced traditional Japanese storytelling by having native Japanese minstrels incorporate Christian narratives into their ballads to help in the propagation of Christianity. As Leandro Tormo Sanz and Catalina Villanueva Bilar remark, after the Jesuits arrived in Japan, European elements began appearing in

[4] "Xavier" is in fact the Basque name of the castle where he was born. It means "new house" (Brodrick 330n1).

[5] The letters from Japan, numbered 90-94 in the Schurhammer-Wicki series, were all written in Kagoshima on 5 November 1549. Letters 90-93 are in Spanish. The last three paragraphs of letter 93 are in Portuguese. Letter 94 is in Portuguese, with a postscript in Spanish.

[6] I also cite from letters 96 and 97 (Cochin, 29 January 1552) and letter 108 (Goa, April 1552). Letters 96 and 108 are in Portuguese and letter 97 is in Spanish.

[7] A sonnet historically attributed to Xavier, *No me mueve, mi Dios*, was probably the work of an anonymous Jesuit. For a discussion of this text, see Elizalde (59-105).

[8] I know of no similar studies of Xavier's influence on Portuguese writing.

Japanese folklore, most likely as a result of what they regard as a cultural *mestizaje* of native Japanese bards (567-68).

Xavier was assisted in his missionary activities in Japan by a Japanese convert, Angirō (baptized Paulo de Santa Fe), whom he first met in Malacca in December 1547. Angirō had killed a man in Japan and fled with the Portuguese trader Jorge Álvares for the express purpose of joining Xavier and converting to Christianity. Angirō recalls his initial encounter with Xavier in a subsequent letter to Loyola (itself the earliest known text written by a Japanese in a European language):[9] "de la primera vista quedé muy edeficado y deseié de amor de le servir y nunqua dél me apartar" (Izawa 318). Xavier, however, was also edified by Angirō, whose tales of his homeland, coupled with his own personal qualities (Xavier was most impressed by Angirō's intellectual curiosity), instilled in him a yearning to visit Japan. Once there, Angirō was Xavier's linguistic and cultural mediator.[10] Angirō's ability to translate Christian doctrine from Portuguese into Japanese was nevertheless limited. He had only a rudimentary knowledge of Portuguese and, as a member of the samurai class, was unfamiliar with Japanese religious vocabulary and unable to read the Chinese script in which Japanese Buddhist theology was written. His translation of the Catholic catechism was thus flawed, and consequently Xavier often found himself unable to present a coherent Christian message to the Japanese people. As Urs App argues, the Japanese may actually have regarded Xavier, who hailed most recently from India, as the representative of another Buddhist sect rather than an entirely new religion (221). According to App, Angirō depicted Buddhism to Xavier in Christian terms, leading him initially to wonder if at some earlier time Christianity had reached Japan. He likewise portrayed Christianity to the Japanese in Buddhist terms, thereby creating an illusion of religious similarity, even though a conflict of religious ideologies was ultimately inevitable.[11]

[9] Angirō's letter is reproduced by Izawa (314-20).

[10] It is not clear from the letters why Angirō was able to return to Japan without facing retribution for his earlier crime.

[11] App, who writes two articles on Xavier's discussion of Japan both prior to and during his visit, highlights Xavier's ignorance of Japanese Buddhism. Ross, in contrast, argues that Xavier's effort to translate Christian doctrine into Japanese reveals a belief that "becoming a Christian was not to be linked inextricably to becoming Portuguese"

Angirō's family and friends quickly converted to Christianity, but during Xavier's nearly two-and-a-half year stay in Kyūshū and western Honshū, the number of converts remained relatively small, and Christian teachings were continually contested. As Xavier explains, many Japanese had difficulty with the concept of God as universal creator, since this led inevitably to the vexed question of evil in the world. Even if God, as Xavier insisted, did not create evil, he created beings capable of evil, and from the Japanese perspective he was at least indirectly responsible not only for sin itself but also for its end result: hell. For many of Xavier's potential converts, the notion of an eternal hell undermined the image of a beneficent God. But more important, it threatened to subvert their cultural identity. Through the prayers of the *bonzes*, the Japanese traditionally believed that the souls of their ancestors could be rescued from hell. In affirming Christian doctrine (and most certainly in an effort to break the power of the *bonzes*), Xavier, like Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, imparted the bitter lesson that the damned are in hell as a consequence of their own free choices and hence, despite our inclination to pity them, must be irrevocably left behind: "Muytos chorão os mortos. . . Eu lhes digo que nenhum remedio tem" [Many weep for the dead. . . I tell them that there is no remedy] (letter 96, 276).[12] According to the new religion, the living must forget the dead and focus on their freedom to do good in the here and now. What they will gain (in addition to salvation) is a heightened sense of individual worth. But they will also lose something of the past that binds them together as a people. In fact to be "born again" as a Christian in sixteenth-century Japan, with its long-established cult of ancestors, meant to be reborn less Japanese and as such primed for even greater Western incursions than Xavier himself ever imagined.

In attempting to justify Christianity, Xavier does not challenge Buddhism on theological grounds (nor does he distinguish between

(28). Ross thus sees Xavier as an early practitioner of the adaptive missionary style of the Jesuits in East Asia.

[12] Xavier in fact wavers on the question of the fate of the dead, and attempts to assuage the anguish of the Japanese by informing them that God's law is inscribed in the hearts of all humans, including pagans (letter 96, 267). But he does not, as claimed by subsequent Catholic apologists (e.g. Brodrick 263 and Schurhammer 235-36n101), actually affirm that the pagan ancestors of the Japanese might be saved.

Buddhist and Shintoist aspects of Japanese religion),[13] but instead attacks the *bonzes*. As he explains, Japanese Buddhist sects all profess five fundamental commandments prohibiting murder, robbery, fornication, lying, and drinking alcohol. The *bonzes*, however, claim that most people are unable to uphold these precepts on a regular basis. They therefore offer to obey them on behalf of the people and through prayer and religious observance expiate their sins (as well as those of the damned in hell), provided, Xavier caustically notes, they receive material and monetary remuneration. Xavier is actually less judgmental about the native religion itself than what he ostensibly perceives as an economic exploitation of the people by the *bonzes*:

> Eles numqua fazem esmola, mas querem que todos lhas fação a eles. Tem abitos, modos e maneiras pera tirar dinheiro das gentes, os quaes deixo de sprever por evitar proluxidade. [They never give alms, but want everyone to give alms to them. They have customs, methods, and ways of squeezing money out of the people, which I shall not enumerate in order to avoid prolixity.] (letter 96, 258)

Xavier implies that the *bonzes* regard hell as if it were purgatory. His charge that they extort money for the remittance of the souls of the damned is nevertheless striking insofar as it echoes, at times almost verbatim, the diatribes of sixteenth-century Protestants against the sale of indulgences.[14] Xavier in fact seems to use contemporary attacks against Catholicism as a means of discrediting Buddhism and validating his own religion in the eyes of the Japanese.

Xavier deplores the bonzes even more for what he deems their moral laxity. Whereas Álvares remarks merely in passing and without judgment that they engage in sodomy,[15] Xavier takes their "sin against nature" as a decisive reason that traditional Japanese religion

[13] Didier argues that Xavier is disconcerted by the diversity of Japanese Buddhist sects and blind to Shinto, since in his own native culture (Counter-Reformation Europe and post-Reconquest Spain) differing religious traditions could not coexist (18).

[14] Martin Luther, in a similar vein, states in his 27th thesis: "There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest" (Dillenberger 493).

[15] Álvares writes that the *bonzes* "vsan la sodomia con los muchachos q enseñan y esto no es abominable antre ellos en general" (Izawa 253).

must be discarded.[16] Spaniards during the period of imperialist expansion often imputed the practice of sodomy to alien peoples in an attempt to justify conquest on moral grounds.[17] Xavier, whose aim is conversion rather than conquest, limits the charge to his religious rivals, unaware that they themselves had a tradition of condemning clerical carnality (Faure 209). He thus declares: "Tienen estos bonzos en sus monesterios muchos mininos, hijos de hidalgos, a los quales enseñan a leer y escribir, y con éstos cometen sus maldades" (letter 90, 188). Xavier does not denounce these relationships specifically as pederastic since from his perspective all acts of sodomy are mortal sins and as such equally evil regardless of the age of the participants. Yet as he reveals, homoerotic relations in pre-modern Japan typically crossed generational lines, and Buddhist monasteries were a locus of homoerotic activity. In fact, a whole genre of love tales of monks and their young charges (known as *chigo monogatari* [acolyte stories]) flourished during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Male homoeroticism was present not only in monastic life but also in the social organization of the samurai.[18] Xavier uses the term *hidalgo* to denote a samurai (a figure he clearly admires, perhaps because of Angirō)[19] since both maintain a rigorous code of honor despite the fact they are often poor. As Xavier observes, samurai never marry below their social class, even if in so doing they might raise their economic status, "de manera que más estiman la honra

[16] For further examples of how the Jesuits used sodomy to disparage Buddhism, see Cooper 46, 47, 315, 318, 319, and 322.

[17] The sixteenth-century Spaniard Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda invoked sodomy as a reason for war against the Native Americans (I: 57). His contemporary, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, went so far as to claim they were all sodomites and thus impossible to convert, an accusation that the Indian advocate, Bartolomé de las Casas, emphatically denied (Casas 326). As Faure points out, Europeans were so inclined to impute sodomy to their enemies that Xavier's testimony by itself is not a reliable gauge of the extent of homoerotic practice among Japanese Buddhist clergy (209).

[18] For representations of samurai homoeroticism in premodern Japanese writing, see the tales of the sixteenth-century author Ihara Saikaku translated by Schalow. For contemporary analyses of male-male sexuality in early Japanese writing and culture, see Leupp, Pflugfelder, Schalow, "Kūkai," and Watanabe and Iwata.

[19] Xavier's respect for the samurai is often explained by their ostensible similarity to the Spanish *hidalgos*. Didier, for instance, claims that because of the samurai Xavier felt completely at home in Japan (19). Xavier, however, never explicitly compares Japan and Spain.

que las riquezas" (letter 90, 186). What Xavier does not notice, or perhaps ignores as irrelevant to his specific goal of conversion, is that the kind of sexual relations the samurai allow between their sons and the *bonzes* are integral to their own military ethos. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, male homoeroticism, which came to be designated in popular Japanese discourse as *shudō* (the way of youths),[20] was increasingly identified with samurai rather than Buddhist monks. As Gregory M. Pflugfelder argues, *shudō* bonds between samurai were thought to foster the skills and values of honorable warriors. Through them, younger samurai developed military prowess and acquired the demeanor and attitude befitting their role, whereas older samurai continually endeavored to prove themselves worthy of emulation. According to Pflugfelder, *shudō* was therefore "believed to have a mutually ennobling effect" (71).

Xavier, in opposition to Japanese custom, uses the Christian conception of sodomy to create a distinction between a good people (including samurai) and a pernicious clergy. He alleges that the Japanese despise the sexual life of the *bonzes* but through force of habit have come to tolerate it: "aunque a todos paresca mal, no lo estrañan" (letter 90, 188). The *bonzes* themselves are unmoved by the moral reprobation of the Jesuits: "todo lo que [les] dezimos les cae en gracia. . . se ríen y no tienen ninguna vergüença de oyr reprehensiones de pecado tan feo" (letter 90, 188). But the people respond more strongly:

> quamdo hiamos pelas ruas, herão os meninos e outra gemte que nos perseguia, fazemdo escarneo de nós, dizemdo: . . . «Estes são os que deffemdem o pecado da sodomia», por ser muito geral amtre eles. [When we went through the streets, children and other people would pursue us, ridiculing us and saying, "these are the ones who prohibit the sin of sodomy," because it is very common among them.] (letter 96, 261)

Sodomy, Xavier insists, is a common practice precisely because of the influence of the *bonzes*:

> Ho povo asy ho faz tomando deles exemplo, dizemdo que, se os bomzos ho fazem tambem ho farão eles. [The people thus do it, taking from them

[20] *Shudō* is a contraction of *wakashudō* (*wakashu*=adolescent-male and *dō*=way). As Pflugfelder points out, not only is the erotic object male but, as in most traditional Japanese discourses, the erotic subject is male as well.

example, saying that if the bonzes do it, they will do it as well.] (letter 96, 268)

Xavier's comments are thus clearly contradictory, unless we are to understand that the "people" (and here he seems actually to overstate the case) regularly engage in practices they simultaneously accept and abhor. What he refuses to acknowledge is that the sexual life of the *bonzes* might mirror, rather than dictate, the mores of the society at large.[21]

This emphasis on sexual irregularity is crucial to Xavier's overall project. When the old religion is replaced by the new, not only will the sin of sodomy disappear but a natural order will be restored in consonance with the Christian doctrine of creation. Sodomy in the theological context of Xavier's writing is sinful because it is a gratuitous act breaking a natural chain of cause and effect that derives from God. In this rigid framework, the notion of God as First Cause is incompatible with any sexual act not specifically intended for reproduction. The Japanese conception of sexuality differs from the European in part, Xavier implies, because they do not believe in a Creator. In their world-view, nature and human beings in fact have no ultimate origin.

Os japões nas lemdas de suas ceitas não tem nenhum conhecimento... da criação do mundo, do sol, lua, estrelas, ceo, terra e mar, e asy de todas as outras coussas. Parece-lhes a eles que aquilo nam teve primcipio. (letter 96, 264)

[The Japanese, in the doctrines of their sects, have no knowledge... of the creation of the world, of the sun, moon, stars, sky, earth, and sea, and of all other things. It seems to them that all that has no beginning.]

Xavier regards this perspective as gravely dangerous: with no grounding in a First Cause, the world would collapse into sexual bedlam and chaos. Yet the open-ended vision of reality that provokes in him such anxiety also allows for a greater expression of sexual

[21] Cabezas recognizes the larger scope of homoerotic activity in sixteenth-century Japan, but replicates the negative stance of Xavier when he writes that "*la sodomía era rampante* entre los bonzos y los samurais" (49; emphasis added). He also imposes contemporary norms (or prejudices) on premodern Japan when he speaks of "maricones declarados" (51).

diversity, even if in premodern Japanese society the conditions of sexual life were clearly delimited.[22]

By witnessing what he perceived to be the evils of Japan, Xavier was transformed both personally and spiritually. In a letter to Loyola he writes:

> Jamás podrya escrybir lo mucho que debo a los de Japón, pues Dyos nuestro Señor, por respeto dellos, me dyó mucho conocymiento de mis infynitas maldades; porque, estando fuera de mí, no conoscy muchos males que abya en my, hasta que me vy en los trabajos y pelygros de Japón. (letter 97, 287)

Though Xavier makes clear what he most abominates in the Japanese (religious doubt, clerical corruption, and concupiscence), he does not specify the evils he comes to acknowledge in himself. But he does shed light on the nature of his relationship to the Japanese. Japan, according to this passage, represents the Other through whom he discovers his own inner self. He confronts this self not when alone or in a state of introspection but when he stands outside of himself and his culture in a foreign land. At first he identifies with the Japanese he encounters since they seem to possess many of the attributes he most values as a European. But when they reveal to him other ways of being human, he recognizes his own potential difference as well. Rather than accept this difference, he chooses to distance himself from it. This entails a withdrawal not simply from an external Other but from the Other already within him.

The culminating moment of Xavier's visit to Japan occurred in Kyōto, at the court of the emperor. Xavier hoped to receive from him permission to preach throughout the realm and possibly also to convert him. But he and his companions failed even to gain an audience ("Nom pudemos falar com ele" [We were unable to speak with him] [letter 96, 262]) and were turned away from the palace gate. As a matter of fact, this was of little consequence since at this point in Japanese history the emperor held no real power, and

[22] Though male-male sexual expression was accepted in Japanese religious and military orders, male-male sexual relations were never an alternative to heterosexual marriage, and female-female sexual relations were largely ignored. As Pflugfelder points out, the primary kinship metaphor of *shudō* was in fact brotherhood, not marriage (41).

afterwards Xavier petitioned the support of powerful feudal lords.[23] Yet the image of him standing at the entrance of the imperial household empty-handed (a gift was normally required for admission, and he had nothing to offer) suggests not only a temporary setback but, in a sense, the beginning of the end of his long odyssey. According to his testimony, Kyōto, the historical and cultural center of Japan, was a place of waste and destruction after years of civil war, and the emperor, the quintessence of the Japanese nation, was silent and invisible. If Japan, as Xavier has shown, is a mirror of the self, then the truth it imparts to him at this moment is his own existential emptiness. As he left Kyōto, he reportedly uttered the words of the 113th Psalm, "In exitu Israel de Aegypto" [When Israel exited Egypt] (Schurhammer 213), as if it were his own salvation he now sought rather than that of the Japanese people. Though his promised land was not of this world, his geographic course would henceforth lead westward, away from a land "aparejada para todo género de pecados" (letter 97, 290), away from the chaos of a world unordered by God, and, in the final analysis, away from the terror of nothingness.

The letters of Xavier nonetheless reveal a tension present in much orientalist discourse between a process of identification and differentiation. Initially, Xavier discerns in the Japanese—beginning with Angirō in Malacca[24]—a similarity with Europeans, and in many passages of his letters seems eager to highlight cultural commonalities. He also invokes race by claiming that the Japanese are white.[25] In the sixteenth century the racial identity of East Asians had not been fixed in Western ideology and race as an epistemological cat-

[23] The strategy of the Jesuit missionaries was to convert the leaders of a nation first, and through them the people. Brodrick argues that when Xavier realized that the Japanese emperor was powerless and the country had no supreme authority figure, he began to turn his attention away from Japan toward China in the hope of converting the Chinese emperor and through him spreading Christianity in East Asia (219).

[24] After Xavier's departure Angirō again fled Japan, perhaps to avoid persecution by Buddhist clergy, and became a pirate in the China seas.

[25] Pero Díez, a Galician from Monterrey, Mexico, whose recollections form the basis of the earliest written account of the Portuguese "discovery" of Japan, describes the Japanese as a "gente. . . blanca é barbada" (Izawa 235), adding that "las mujeres son en gran manera muy blancas y hermosas, [y] andan vestidas á manera de catellanas, de paño ó seda, conforme á su estado" (236). Álvares also speaks of the Japanese as a "gente blanca de buenas disposissiones" (Izawa 245).

egory had not been grounded in biology.[26] Xavier largely disregards eye-shape, the primary physical characteristic that subsequent Europeans would use to establish Asian difference,[27] and takes skin-color as a sign of cultural equivalence between Japanese and Europeans. Yet this is in fact racism, albeit in nascent form, since whiteness is implicitly equated with cultural superiority. Xavier is so convinced of the preeminence of the Japanese over all other non-Christians that he confidently reports that "entre todas las tyerras descubyertas destas partes, sola la gente de Japón está para en ella se perpetuar la chrystyandad" (letter 97, 291). Ironically, of course, Christianity in the long run made fewer inroads in Japan than in any other East Asian country.

Yet even if the Japanese are like him (from the Christian perspective they too, after all, are endowed with immortal souls), they are also profoundly different, or rather must continually be posited as such if he is to maintain his ideal self. In ontological terms, this self remains ungrounded, appearing only insofar as it is differentiated from the non-Christian in the initial phases of proselytization. When the non-Christian accepts conversion, difference is erased and new converts are sought in an endless cycle of identity-formation. If, however, the non-Christian refuses conversion and remains obstinately different, then the act of self-affirmation that informs the missionary project (despite all the apparent self-sacrifice) short-circuits. This is the plight of Xavier. Virtually alone in an alien milieu, he must either assume as his own the Other's difference or retreat, as he eventually does, and resume his project elsewhere. Japan in his letters is thus not a site of Christian or Western self-fashioning but instead a sign of the impossibility of any permanent self-identification, whether as Christian, Western, or merely human.[28]

[26] Spain in the early modern period had already developed a proto-racism through the concept of *limpieza de sangre*, which located Semitic difference not merely in religious practice but in the body itself. Xavier makes a point of noting that there were no Jews or Moors in Japan.

[27] Elsewhere Xavier remarks that though the Chinese have "ojos muy pequeños" (letter 97, 291), they too are a "genta blanca."

[28] As App insightfully suggests, the whole question of sameness and difference is complicated by mutual misunderstanding. To the extent that the Japanese interpreted Christianity as an avatar of Buddhism, difference appeared to them "in the guise of the same" (242). App argues that Xavier realized this at the end of his Japanese sojourn and therefore believed his entire mission had failed.

Needless to say, Japan's reaction to Xavier and the West was motivated by more concrete concerns than these. Japanese rulers became increasingly hostile to Christian missionary activity in the late sixteenth century, especially after the arrival of the Franciscan friars whose presence they regarded as a prelude to conquest by Spanish forces poised menacingly in the Philippines. Fear of the Spanish to a large degree prompted the Japanese to close their doors to the West in the seventeenth century.[29] But Xavier, to his credit, never favored military conquest and discouraged the Spanish from even approaching Japan. In what is perhaps the noblest passage of his entire correspondence (letter 108, 356-57), he ostensibly attempts to alert the Spanish to potential disaster. Yet in so doing he not only prevents a clash between Spanish and Portuguese but also surreptitiously safeguards Japan from onslaught by Spain. The Spanish, who at the time referred to the Japanese archipelago as the Islas Platarias,[30] dreamed of finding silver deposits exceeding in wealth even the riches of the Andes. As Agostinho de Azevedo wrote of Japan: "Estas são as Platárias por que os Castelhanos sempre sospirão" [these are the Silver Isles, which the Spanish have always craved] (Schurhammer 549n15). But as Xavier cunningly remarks (revealing only the half truth of his orientalist vision), the seas surrounding them are treacherous, the people are vicious and warlike, and the land is sterile and barren. He exhorts his fellow Jesuit, Simón Rodríguez, to communicate these warnings to the rulers of Castile and Emperor Carlos V himself and to dissuade them from sending an armada of "discovery" to Japan's shores. Xavier's writing, despite his own dreams of spiritual conquest, thus belies the facile efforts of many later historians to subsume Christian missionary activity within larger imperialist schemes even if, in the final analysis, the Cross often did render non-Europeans more vulnerable to the sword.

[29] Japan also took an aggressive stance towards Spain. Prior to the "Closed Country" policy of the seventeenth century, the Japanese for the first time in their history considered large-scale foreign conquest. The military leader Hideyoshi even attempted to make the Spanish governor of the Philippines recognize him as suzerain.

[30] The Islas Platarias (also known as the Isla Rica de la Plata) were not always identified with Japan, and as Knauth points out, continued to haunt the European imagination long after Japan was known to the West (197).

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