

32 Luís Fróis: *Of the Conversion of Dōsan* (1585)

Introduced and translated by Katja Triplett

Introduction

The abridged translated excerpt reproduced below is a Jesuit conversion narrative recorded by Luís Fróis (1532–1597). The Jesuit father Fróis wrote the text in Portuguese. It appeared in chapter 26 of his *História de Japam* (History of Japan). In the chapter titled “Of the conversion of Dōsan, one of the best scholars and the leading doctor of Japan, residing in Miyako,” Fróis depicts Christianity’s superiority over (Zen) Buddhism. He also emphasises that religion triumphs over medicine, by claiming that religion is the “true” medicine. His text illustrates that Jesuits regarded Jesuit missionaries as “preachers and professors of the divine and supernatural science and of the salvation of men.” According to the source, the conversation between the Japanese Buddhist medical doctor, Manase Dōsan (1507–1594), and the Jesuit father Belchior de Figueiredo (c. 1530–1597) took place in Miyako (Kyoto) in 1584. Manase Dōsan is a historical figure, but he most probably did not convert to Christianity. While many Japanese researchers, including historian of Christianity Ebisawa Arimichi,^I do indeed claim that Dōsan converted to Christianity, this is contested by Hattori, a scholar of medical history. Not long after the alleged conversion, military leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) issued an edict abolishing Christianity; Dōsan remained in high favour, however, and continued to treat Hideyoshi, as his personal doctor. Had Dōsan been as devout a Christian as Fróis states, he likely would have fallen from grace. Hattori assumes that the doctor, if the described encounter really did occur, was merely interested in European medicine, and sought out the Jesuits’ company for this reason. In 1608, Dōsan was posthumously elevated to a high rank of honour. Had Dōsan been a Christian, this would certainly not have occurred during this period of anti-Christian persecution. Moreover, Manase Dōsan’s encounter with the Jesuits is not mentioned in Japanese documents.^{II} It is reasonable to assume, then, that he sought contact with the Jesuits because he was curious about their medical knowledge, but had rather less interest in their religion.

I Ebisawa Arimichi 海老澤有道, *Kirishitan no shakai katsudō oyobi Nanban igaku* 切支丹の社會活動及南蠻醫學 (Tokyo: Fuzanbō, 1944), 264.

II Hattori Tōrō [Toshirō] 服部敏良, *Muromachi Azuchi Momoyama jidai igakushi no kenkyū* 室町安土桃山時代医学史の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1971), 424–29.

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In Fróis' report, religion is clearly depicted as being different – and superior – to natural science. The narrative about the religious encounter, as reported from the Jesuit side, sheds light on early modern European ideas of religion and its other, in the context of the Catholic mission in Buddhist Japan.

Bibliographical Information

Luís Fróis. *Historia de Japam (1583–1587)*. Vol 4. Annotated by José Wicki. Lisbon: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, 1983; 195–201.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

The edition is based on the only extant manuscript copy of the part of Fróis' *Historia de Japam* that covers the year 1584:

Apparatos para a História Ecclesiástica do Bispado de Macau [Luís Fróis], 1701, COD. 11098, National Library, Lisbon, fol. 339v–343v.

Chapter 26 is a revised letter written by Fróis in Nagasaki on 17 August 1585. The letter is printed in: José Manuel Garcia, ed. *Cartas que os padres e irmãos da Companhia de Jesus escreuerão dos Reynos de Iapão & China aos da mesma Companhia da India, & Europa, des do anno de 1549 até o de 1580; Segunda parte das cartas de Iapão que escreuerão os padres, & irmãos da Companhia de Jesus*. Facsimile edition of the 1598 Évora edition. Vol. 2. Maia: Castoliva, 1997; fol. 152r–159v.

Another version can be found in:

Katja Triplett. "Buddhist Monastic Physicians' Encounters with the Jesuits in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Japan, As Told from Both Sides." In *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Sources*, edited by C. Pierce Salguero. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019; 6–9.

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Among the physicians of the sixty-six domains of Japan, the three best reside in Miyako, and the most excellent of those three is called Dōsan. This man is not only famous for his medical skills, but he has other rare skills, and, because of those, he is honoured and venerated by the kings and princes, and he is given the utmost preference everywhere. There are two [skills] that make him stand out: (1) He is the best scholar in all of the Japanese kingdoms, well versed in Chinese characters, and knowledgeable in all the arts; (2) he is the most eloquent person there is, and his parables and aphorisms are a great pleasure to the gentlemen when they converse with him. He has eight hundred disciples [. . .] in Miyako, whom he teaches the arts of medicine, letters, and rhetoric. [p. 195/196] He is famous for healing, and, for many years, he has set up his house in Miyako for lecturing publicly on medicine. He was past seventy

years of age, a man with a good complexion, and of a prudent nature, living an orderly and moral life, and being kind when conversing with others.

Last year, Father Belchior de Figueiredo,^I the rector of the college in Funai, had a grave and troublesome illness, so he went to Miyako, because he was better accommodated there, especially in terms of physicians. Once settled in Miyako, he was overwhelmed with so much pain that he wanted to visit the aforementioned doctor. But there was a difficulty: Because [the doctor] had such a great reputation, he made excuses about his age, and never left the house to see any patient.

Although other physicians were recommended to him, the father kept asking to see Dōsan, and, because the father could not stand, they carried him in a palanquin to [Dōsan's] house. The father talked about [his health], and, after Dōsan had given him some remedies, they started a conversation, discussing medicines that could prolong life – being both elderly men.^{II} Reaching the topic of religion and what we do, Dōsan said something about himself: “For the health of my body, I have lived in chastity for sixteen years, despite having an old wife [i.e. having been married for a long time].”

The father used this as an occasion to share some thoughts. The doctor was hard of hearing, so, leaning toward his ear, he said that bodily health, which lasts for only such a short time, as experience shows, forces men to toil and sweat to conserve it. Much more attention and diligence should be invested in conserving the health of the soul, which will lead to eternal life.

Dōsan replied, saying, “Is there life in men that abides?”

The father responded, “Yes, there is. Above the entire universe is a principle of immortal and glorious life; it is the Creator and absolute Lord of both heaven and earth. By his grace, souls live forever, and are saved. This principle, which is superior and has infinite wisdom and kindness, gives each creature in the universe, and humans in particular, their being, life, and abilities.”

The father knew that he [Dōsan] belonged to the Zen sect,^{III} which does not recognise the immortality of the soul. Knowing that the Zen sect believes neither in the renunciation of glory, nor in suffering torment in the future life, but rather that when the life of a man expires, all his things end up [expiring] as well – that man becomes chaos in which there is neither life nor death, and that the Zen sect calls this [p. 196/197] *fombun*^{IV} – the father said, “Such a Creator of the universe is by no means to be

I KT: Belchior de Figueiredo (c. 1530–1597) was born in Goa, India, and entered the Company of Jesus in 1554. He first worked in Goa, but came to Japan in 1564, where he worked in various places, including Funai, for several decades. He ultimately returned to Goa for health reasons, and died there.

II KT: In fact, at the point described, Father Belchior would have been around 54 years old.

III KT: Fróis called it “seita dos jensus.”

IV KT: Jp. *honbun* 本分. In his report on the conversation between Father Belchior and Dōsan, which he did not personally witness, Fróis wants to refer to a Japanese Buddhist equivalent for the primary principle – i.e. the immortal soul. In Buddhism, the term *honbun* does indicate an original state, but actually means that every human being is originally (*hon*) endowed with the Buddha nature; the beings literally “share” (*bun*) in the Buddha nature.

compared with the Zen primary principle of everything. The Zen sect believes that all humans are created and become one and the same substance. Such chaos has neither wisdom, life, nor kindness. We cannot tell the created what they do not have.”

Dōsan replied, “While I have studied the sects of Japan, I have never yielded to any of them, not even the Zen sect, because I am not at all satisfied [by any of them]. I also have my way to get by, though.”

The father said, “It is not enough for me to only consider medicine for [physical] health. Just so, being obliged and entrusted to you as a doctor and professor of [medicine], your consideration is not enough without [your also] commending us. We are preachers and professors of the divine and supernatural science and of the salvation of men, ordered to Japan, many thousand leagues [away], [. . .] for this purpose.”

Dōsan smiled, showing that he was satisfied with the comparison, but still disappointed the father by saying, “Why should old Dōsan get into new considerations now?”

“Now more than ever,” said the father, “you are aware that you are already near your last moments.”

[Dōsan] thought of another excuse, saying, “I have no physical strength anymore to go to your church, which is far away, to hear your sermons.” [. . . p. 197/198]

[In the end,] Dōsan kept his promise [to visit the church], and brought two presents, as was customary in Japan – one for father Organtino,^V who was [our] superior in these parts, and the other for Father Belchior de Figueiredo. He visited him in his cell, took his pulse, using words of much love [*amor*], and offered to cure him free of charge, out of love [*amor*] and the sense of obligation that he felt toward him. [. . . p. 198/199]

Following preparation, [Dōsan] asked for baptism. Father Organtino baptised him, and named him Belchior. Dōsan received the holy baptism with gratitude, and, after he was joined with the Lord, and the fathers and brothers had cheered, he bade them farewell. [. . . p. 199/200]

The news of Dōsan’s conversion reached the ears of the Vō,^{VI} the supreme king of all of Japan. The heathen enemies of the law of God maligned [the event] in such a way that he [the Vō] sent a message about it, saying, “It is unworthy for Dōsan to become a disciple of the law of the Christians, an enemy of the law of the *camis* [i.e. *kami* 神], whom he calls demons, a law which will certainly provoke their wrath.”

Dōsan responded prudently, saying, “Having only been a Christian for a very short time, I had not heard that the law of God calls the *camis* demons. The priests should know that the *camis* were men and princes of the past, and [belong to] the royal generation of the Vō and the nobility of Japan, but I have heard a doctrine of virtues and of righteousness.” [p. 200/201]

V KT: Gneccchi-Soldo Organtino (1530–1609), an Italian Jesuit, came to Japan in 1570.

VI KT: The Vō is Ōgimachi, the heavenly ruler (*tennō*) or emperor of Japan. He reigned from 1557 to 1586.

The message Dōsan sent was soon made known to the Church, and he sent a message to the Japanese brothers who preached. The message stated that if, by chance, they had referred to the *camis* in this manner [i.e. as demons], they should now always refer to them [differently], out of respect for the Vō and the nobility of Japan, so as not to anger the hearts of the Vō and the gentile lords with this, [and turn them] against the Christians. Instead, they should describe the *camis* as dead men, whose strengths and merits did not grant them salvation or help them in the problems of this life, and they should [say] this with moderate words, not offending the gentiles. [. . .]