

33 Anonymous: Decree on Banishing Christian Missionaries (1587)

Introduced and translated by Katja Triplett

Introduction

After the military ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–1598) defeated the Shimazu on the island of Kyushu, he issued this decree in Hakata in 1587. The short legal text, written in Japanese, is also referred to as the “Order to Expel Jesuit Missionaries” in English-language sources. The decree does not explicitly mention the Jesuits, but Franciscans and members of other orders only became active in Japan after 1587. The decree directed all daimyo (local rulers), some of them themselves baptised, to banish the *padres* (*bateren*) of the Society of Jesus from their lands. The document was the first decree to ban Christianity in Japan, but it appears not to have been enforced, and missionaries remained active in Japan for some time thereafter.

The text identifies Christian teachings as false religion, and Christianity’s means of proselytising as unacceptable, because the missionaries allegedly used (scientific and medical) knowledge. Hideyoshi forbids his vassals from bestowing land to the church. His decree also differentiates between foreign missionaries and foreign traders. Japan, as the “land protected by its own gods,” *shinkoku* 神國, is contrasted with Christian lands that are the origin of heresy (*jahō* 邪法). Buddhist law (*buppō* 佛法), or Buddha Dharma, is the correct and acceptable religion.

The text also mentions *hō* 法 in its meaning as “method” – here the method used by the *padres* of enticing the Japanese to convert, namely *chie no hō* 智恵之法, which could be translated as “witty, clever methods.” *Chie* has a rather positive connotation, so the decree points to the scientific and medical knowledge that the *padres* professed in Japan. Setting up hospitals, and treating people medically, apparently led to many conversions. The decree also mentions commercial trade as a matter separate from missionary – i.e. (false, dangerous) religious activities.

The experience of a religion with missionaries who sought to replace the local religions was new to the emerging central military administration in Japan. It led the authorities to differentiate between ‘Christianity’ as a concept or institution, and ‘Christians,’ who were of interest to the Japanese authorities when these (foreign) Christians were traders. International trade was regarded as a pursuit separate from religion – or at least one not connected to it in a harmful way. Indeed, the authorities recommend further pursuing trading contacts with Christians.

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Bibliographical Information

Kuwata Tadachika, ed. [Decree on Banishing Christian Missionaries]. In *Toyotomi Hideyoshi kenkyū*. Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1976; 349.

This edition is based on an original copy of the decree held at Matsura Historical Museum, Hirado, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan.

There is another translation into English that can be found in: J.S.A. Elisonas. "The Evangelic Furnace: Japan's First Encounter with the West." In *Sources of Japanese Tradition Volume Two: 1600 to 2000, Abridged, Part One: 1600 to 1868*, 2nd ed., edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck and Arthur E. Tiedemann, 143–84. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

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Decree

Item: Japan is a country of the gods, and it is utterly outrageous that it should allow the evil law to come from a Christian country.

Item: It is unheard of for a lord to force the commoners to become believers by approaching them and destroying their shrines and temples. [Hideyoshi] has the lords of the land rule over their territories, but only temporarily. It is inexcusable that they should obey the supreme laws of the realm and do various matters accordingly, but do so embroiling the commoners.

Item: As written above, Christian missionaries are breaking Buddhist law in Japan when they, by means of their knowledge, turn people into parishioners as they please. You cannot keep Christian missionaries in Japan, so they have twenty days from today to prepare themselves, and return to their Christian country. It would be inexcusable if anyone among the commoners were to claim that someone is a Christian missionary when he is not.

Item: The *kurofune* trading ships are here to do business, and this is something else, so continue to do business with various goods.

Item: From now on, as long as they do not interfere with the Buddhist Dharma, people are always welcome to travel to and from Christian countries, even if they are not traders. Take heed of this.

End of decree.

Tenshō year 15, sixth month, nineteenth day [seal]