

Book Review

A Failing Mission?

Salvation in the Jesuit Mission in Japan Under Francisco Cabral

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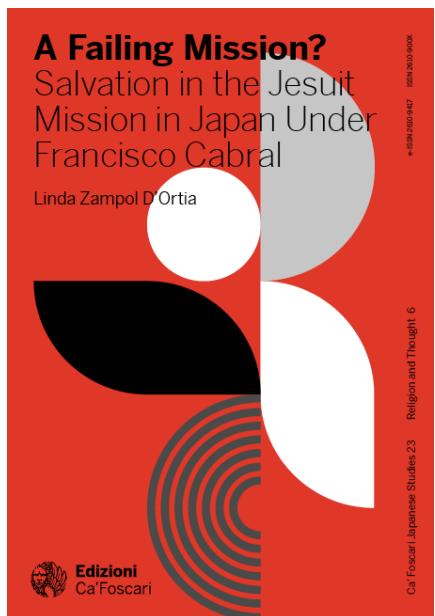
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A Failing Mission?: Salvation in the Jesuit Mission in Japan Under Francisco Cabral

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Abstract

This book examines how sixteenth century Japan rejected the political, societal, and cultural pressures of evangelization by Jesuit missionaries.

A case study of the militant and militarized leadership of Francisco Cabral, SJ (1529 - 1609) a Portuguese Jesuit priest and missionary who arrived in Japan in 1570, indicates that some fellow Jesuits argued that a more conciliatory, flexible approach was needed to win over the Japanese public. Yet the Catholic church preferred the leadership of Cabral to these progressive views, even though his efforts would eventually fail.

Details such as whether Jesuits in Japan should wear silk garments in imitation of Buddhist monks, to declare their identity to the public, were subjects of ardent debate.

Likewise, the extent to which evangelizing Christians should learn the Japanese language, eat Japanese food, and follow other local customs, was a matter of disagreement amongst Jesuit superiors.

Ultimately, the most estranged and despising view of Japan, Cabral's, was allowed to dominate, with tragic results for Christianity in Japan over the next decades, when martyrdoms and other violence occurred.

Keywords: Japan, Jesuits, ecclesiastical garments

The history of Christianity in Japan has been investigated in detail,¹ but this latest volume in a useful Open Access Ca' Foscari Japanese Studies series² reminds us that religious history cannot be extricated from the subjects of politics, economics, sociology, and colonization.

Dr. Linda Zampol D'Ortia, who teaches at the Department of Asian and North African Studies of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), focuses on the Japanese rejection of Christian missionaries in the sixteenth century, as a specific cultural and societal rebuke to the leadership of Francisco Cabral, SJ (1529-1609) a Portuguese Jesuit priest and missionary.

A Failing Mission? comprises five chapters, an introduction, and brief concluding remarks.

The first chapter offers historical background on efforts of Christian missionaries in Japan and the life of Francisco Cabral before he arrived there.

Chapter two investigates the controversial issue of whether foreign missionaries should wear Japanese-style silken garments to better assimilate with the local population.

Chapter three examines how the Jesuit mission in Japan communicated with the Jesuit headquarters in Goa and Rome.

Chapter four discusses conversion as a supposed method of saving the souls of the Japanese people.

Chapter five addresses the Japanese spurning of Jesuit missionaries, giving evidence that Cabral's persistent cultural insensitivity was a major cause for this failure.

This appears to be a reasonable interpretation, given that Cabral's conception of his church was not just militant, but also overtly military.

Notoriously, he concocted an abortive plot in 1584 for Spain, Portugal, and Japan to band together to invade and Christianize China. Although this plan was never carried out, history remembers Cabral as a colonizing warrior, even in his comparatively minor administrative decisions.

¹ See Mullins, M. (2003). *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*. Series: Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 5 Japan, Volume: 10. Brill. Also Higashibaba, I. (2001). *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*. Series: Brill's Japanese Studies Library, Volume: 16. Brill.

² See the homepage of the Ca' Foscari Japanese Studies series at <https://edizioncafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni4/collane/ca-foscari-japanese-studies/>.

After Cabral arrived in Japan in the spring of 1570 to serve as Superior of the Jesuit Japan Mission, he banned local Jesuit missionaries from wearing orange silk robes in imitation of Buddhist priests.

This practice had started under the direction of his predecessor, the Basque Spaniard missionary Francis Xavier, who had been so successful in his ministry that he was eventually declared a saint, an honor which notably eluded Cabral.³

Instead of seeing orange silk as a visual sign to the Japanese that the Catholic missionaries were religious workers, Cabral was alarmed by the material as a diabolic, un-Christian symbol. Similarly, he prevented missionaries from eating Japanese food, learning the Japanese language, and otherwise cooperating, or collaborating, with the local culture.

Cabral even shunned Japanese Catholic priests, believing that there was no point in training them, since they would doubtless grow to hate Europeans.

Unsurprisingly, this hardline approach was widely unpopular, although there was a temporary boost in church membership in Japan when some daimyo, the great lords who were vassals of the shogun, converted to Christianity, often to obtain better trade conditions with Macau.

The Jesuits had established Macau as a significant Asian base, from which the efforts to evangelize in Japan emanated.

Dr. D'Ortia notes that Chinese merchants were not permitted to deal with Japan, which allowed the Portuguese to ‘insinuate themselves as a third party in the silk commerce.’⁴

Although Japan had been more receptive to the work of Francis Xavier than it was with Cabral, in all cases of evangelizing, the attempts at mutual understanding were less like a dialogue and more like two simultaneous ‘monologues,’ the author explains.⁵

Cabral was an extreme case of a monologist, which was known to at least some of his contemporaries. Dr. D'Ortia cites Gnechi-Soldo Organtino, a fellow Jesuit missionary,

³ See Brodrick, J. (1952). *Saint Francis Xavier (1506–1552)*. Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd.

⁴ D'Ortia, LZ. *A Failing Mission? Salvation in the Jesuit Mission in Japan Under Francisco Cabral*. Edizioni Ca' Foscari Venice University Press. 2024. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.* 25.

who upon hearing of Cabral's appointment in Japan, described his colleague as 'an exploiter and a bully who [...] had harassed the people of Macau and the foreign seafarers.'⁶

Yet because Organtino was of humble origins and Cabral had links to the minor nobility of his nation, the former's critique had little relative impact at first.

Gaspar Vilela, another Jesuit missionary in Japan, wrote to his superiors after Cabral's arrival that the latter lacked the maturity and, above all, the 'affability; humility and patience' needed to 'make a good impression on the Japanese.'⁷

As an advocate of Catholic missionaries wearing orange Buddhist-style robes in Japan, Vilela also felt that Cabral's uncompromising ban of this garb, like his shunning of Japanese cuisine, created issues with seemingly small details that 'cause[d] scandal when changed.'⁸

Ostensibly a voice of tolerance, Vilela praised the Japanese for their interest in literature and felt that if they were converted to Christianity, 'wisdom would flourish' in Japan.⁹

Vilela duly studied the Japanese language and spoke directly to Japanese people, without needing interpreters. But Vilela's energetic conversion of the Japanese also included demolishing three Buddhist temples, throwing Buddhist ritual objects into the sea, and destroying pagodas, to be replaced by Christian symbols and edifices.

Yet Vilela's apparent esteem for the Japanese was considered excessive by his superiors, who replaced him with the harsher conquistador-like evangelization of Cabral.

To some extent this new policy was motivated by criticism from Portuguese merchants, who were reportedly shocked by seeing Jesuits in Japan 'dressed in purple silk and waving golden fans'.¹⁰

What other Jesuits saw as a way to communicate with the local population through choice of garb, others, including Cabral, saw as unacceptably luxurious and ornate, unbefitting of missionaries.

⁶ *Ibid.* 35.

⁷ *Ibid.* 36

⁸ *Ibid.* 37.

⁹ Boxer, C. R. (1951). *The Christian Century in Japan*. University of California Press. 108

¹⁰ D'Ortia, LZ. *Op. cit.* 44.

In 1571 he wrote to a colleague that under Japanese influence, Jesuits had started wearing ‘colorful silks and clothes’ and using bed pillows and cushions ‘made of silk.’¹¹

For anyone who identified spirituality with self-mortification, this Japanese-influenced adoption of local textiles was anathema.

Even the concept of color in garments, as seen in the Buddhist tradition, was vehemently opposed. Jesuits were supposed to live in poverty and humility. More than just commenting on these purported violations, Cabral visited Jesuit residences and had silk pillows and a green sleeping gown made of Chinese damask destroyed, to show his disapproval.

Cabral’s reaction was promptly opposed by his colleagues with more experience of Japan. They pointed to the semiotic value of signaling a religious identity in bright shades that were obvious to any onlooker. Without such colors, or dressed in the drab traditional black of European Jesuits, Japanese Catholics would likely be overlooked.

Worse, if they were not recognized as religious workers, Jesuit missionaries in Japan might be generally disrespected by Japanese people and even find themselves in physical danger.

Japanese Christians showed a decided preference for liturgy enlivened by the use of silk, gold, silver, and colors as decorations, including silk banners displayed during funerals. This pageantry was a key element for appealing to the local population with impressive visual spectacles.

Cabral, who saw silk garments worn by Catholics in Japan as the work of the devil, was not persuaded that missionaries needed to wear silk kimonos to blend in with communities by resembling itinerant Buddhist monks. Yet two Jesuits had been kidnapped in Hakata (Fukuoka) and to flee the city undetected, they were disguised by local Christians as *bhikkhuni*¹ or Buddhist nuns.

By contrast, Cabral felt that even at the risk of martyrdom, Jesuits should avoid any such masquerade and openly declare their identity to the Japanese.

Still another Portuguese missionary of the era, Luís Fróis, argued that a certain amount of ornate display was needed to win the respect of the Japanese. Fróis opined that the Japanese ‘great lords were proud, and would be affronted and insulted if the [Jesuit] fathers had appeared in front of them with common and ordinary clothes.’¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.* 50.

¹² *Ibid.* 63

But Cabral rejected these arguments, and under his leadership, missionaries remained highly visible. This became a problem when the samurai and daimyo Toyotomi Hideyoshi became convinced that the real purpose of the European missionaries was to convert the Japanese population to Christianity, colonizing the nation more easily through religion than by military invasion.¹³

Lack of funding eventually made Cabral believe that the mission had been abandoned by God. Not long after he declared his mission a failure and left Japan, Catholic Christianity would be repressed in Japan, under Hideyoshi and the succeeding Tokugawa shogunate.

Foreign missionaries were killed, some by Japanese-style crucifixion. Well before such occurrences, Cabral was noting in official writings his view that the Japanese were “very barbarous” because “[t]hey pride themselves of the fact that nobody can understand their hearts, and of deceiving others. Among themselves they use many praises, and always smile, and are very sly.”¹⁴

Even when he had successfully baptized some Japanese courtiers who converted to Christianity for economic or social reasons, Cabral expressed doubts about the usefulness of their adopting the Western religion, since, he wrote, the ‘people of Japan are the most libertine and sensual that I have ever seen.’¹⁵

A more conciliatory stance to Japanese culture and lifestyle, or a better opinion of Japan and its people, might have prevented some of the more extreme subsequent violence.

This new cross-cultural study implies that paying attention to a host nation’s culture and assimilating with it through respectful observance of local customs is an essential first step for any productive interaction.

As a rare flaw in this otherwise admirably researched account, Dr. D’Ortia might have included more direct quotes from Japanese sources. Yet even from a perspective largely devoted to Cabral’s own viewpoints, his rigidity in opposing Japanese-ness was not unique to his era; it may still serve as a negative example to be avoided today by foreign residents of, and visitors to, the land of the rising sun.

¹³ See Nelson, T. (Winter 2004). Slavery in Medieval Japan. *Monumenta Nipponica*, 59(4), 463–492.

¹⁴ D’Ortia, LZ. *Op. cit.* 68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 119.

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