

from
**THE LIFE AND LETTERS
OF ST. FRANCIS XAVIER**
1552

St. Francis Xavier

On August 15th, 1549, a Portuguese ship entered the Japanese port of Kagoshima, carrying Francis Xavier and several of his fellow missionaries. Xavier believed that Japan was ready for conversion to Christianity. In the two years he spent in Japan, he met fierce resistance from Buddhist monks. However, Xavier is credited with opening the minds of the Japanese to the Western world. This letter, written by Xavier after his return to India, reveals many aspects of 16th-century Japanese society.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Contrasting

What are the differences that Xavier notes between Japanese beliefs and Christian beliefs?

TO THE SOCIETY IN EUROPE:

May the grace and charity of our Lord Jesus Christ be ever with us! Amen.

By the favour of God we all arrived at Japan in perfect health on the 15th of August, 1549. We landed at Cagoxima,¹ the native place of our companions. We were received in the most friendly way by all the people of the city, especially the relations of Paul, the Japanese convert, all of whom had the blessing to receive the light of truth from heaven, and by Paul's persuasion became Christians. During our stay at Cagoxima the people appeared to be wonderfully delighted with the doctrines of the divine law, so entirely new to their ears.

Japan is a very large empire entirely composed of islands. One language is spoken throughout, not very difficult to learn. This country was discovered by the Portuguese eight or nine years ago. The Japanese are very ambitious of honours and distinctions, and think themselves superior to all nations in military glory and valour. They prize and honour all that has to do with war, and all such things, and there is nothing of which they are so proud as of weapons adorned with gold and silver. They always wear swords and daggers both in and out of the house, and when they go to sleep they hang them at the bed's head. In short, they value arms more than any people I have ever seen. They are excellent archers, and usually fight on foot, though there is no lack of horses in the country. They are very polite to each other, but not to foreigners, whom they utterly despise. They spend their means on arms, bodily adornment, and on a number of attendants, and do not in the least care to save money. They are, in short, a very warlike people, and

1. **Cagoxima:** a Japanese port

engaged in continual wars among themselves; the most powerful in arms bearing the most extensive sway. They have all one sovereign, although for one hundred and fifty years past the princes have ceased to obey him, and this is the cause of their perpetual feuds.

In these countries there is a great number, both of men and of women, who profess a religious rule of life; they are called bonzes and bonzesses. There are two sorts of bonzes—the one wear a grey dress, the others a black one. There is great rivalry between them, the grey monks being set against the black monks, and accusing them of ignorance and bad morals. . . .

On certain days the bonzes preach publicly. The sum of all their discourses is that none of the people will be condemned to hell, whatever may be the number of their past and present crimes, for the founders of their sects will take them out of the midst of those flames, if perchance they are condemned to them, especially if the bonzes who have made satisfaction for them constitute themselves their intercessors. And indeed the bonzes boast greatly to the people of their own holiness, on the ground of their obedience to the five laws. At the same time, they also say that the poor who are unable to show kindness to the bonzes have no hope of escaping hell. And they say women are as badly off if they neglect the five precepts. For they say that each woman . . . is covered with more sins than all men put together, and that thus so foul a creature can hardly be saved. They go on to say that there is some hope even for women of escaping from the prison of hell, if they give a great deal more than the men to the bonzes. They further declare that persons who in their lifetime have given money to the bonzes will after their death receive ten times as much in the same coin, for the necessities of their new life; and there are numbers of men and women who intrust considerable sums to the bonzes, in order to receive tenfold in the next world, and the bonzes give them a security in notes, which they write. The ignorant people have no hesitation in believing in this multiplied interest on funds thus invested. The notes of the bonzes are carefully preserved, and people about to die order them to be buried with them, in the belief that the devil will fly at sight of them. The bonzes have thousands of other impostures which I cannot speak of without pain. One thing is very amusing, that though they take money from everybody by way of alms, they themselves never give anything to any one. I omit, for the sake of brevity, the infinite number of ways they have of getting money given to them. But I cannot help grieving and feeling indignant at all the tribute the people pay to men like these, and all the honour in which they hold them. . . .

The Japanese doctrines teach absolutely nothing concerning the creation of the world, of the sun, the moon, the stars, the heavens, the earth, sea, and the rest, and do not believe that they have any origin but themselves. The people were greatly astonished on hearing it said that there is one sole Author and common Father of souls, by whom they were created. This astonishment was caused by the fact that in their religious traditions there is nowhere any mention of a Creator of the universe. If there existed one single First Cause of all things, surely, they said, the Chinese,

from whom they derive their religion, must have known it. For the Japanese give the Chinese the preeminence in wisdom and prudence in everything relating either to religion or to political government. They asked us a multitude of questions concerning this First Cause of all things; whether He were good or bad, whether the same First Cause were the origin of good and of evil. We replied that there exists one only First Cause, and He supremely good, without any admixture of evil.

This did not satisfy them; they considered the devils to be evil by nature, and the enemies of the human race; God therefore, if He were good, could never have done such a thing as create beings so evil. To these arguments we replied that the devils were created good by God, but became evil by their own fault, and that in consequence they were subject to eternal punishment and torment. Then they objected that God, Who was so severe in punishing, was not at all merciful. Again, how could He, if He created the human race in the manner we taught, allow men sent into the world to worship Him to be tempted and persecuted by the devil? In like manner, if God were good, He ought not to have made man so weak and so prone to sin, but free from all evil. Again, it could not be a good God, they said, Who had created that horrible prison of hell, and was to be for ever without pity for those who suffer therein the most fearful torments from all eternity. Lastly, if He were good, He would not have imposed on men those difficult laws of the ten commandments. Their religious traditions, on the contrary, taught that all who should invoke the authors of their religion would be delivered even from the torments of hell.

They were quite unable to digest the idea that men could be cast into hell without any hope of deliverance. They said, therefore, that their doctrines rested, more than ours, on clemency and mercy. In the end, by God's favour, we succeeded in solving all their questions, so as to leave no doubt remaining in their minds. The Japanese are led by reason in everything more than any other people, and in general they are all so insatiable of information and so importunate in their questions that there is no end either to their arguments with us, or to their talking over our answers among themselves. They did not know that the world is round, they knew nothing of the course of the sun and stars, so that when they asked us and we explained to them these and other like things, such as the causes of comets, of the lightning and of rain, they listened to us most eagerly, and appeared delighted to hear us, regarding us with profound respect as extremely learned persons. This idea of our great knowledge opened the way to us for sowing the seed of religion in their minds. . . .

In the course of two months, after numerous conferences, we baptized about five hundred persons at Amanguchi,² and every day, by the mercy of God, others are added to the number. The converts are very zealous in exposing to us the tricks and frauds of the bonzes and sects of Japan; they show so diligently great affection and respect towards us that we have great confidence that they are true and solid Christians.

2. **Amanguchi:** a Japanese town

Before their baptism the converts of Amanguchi were greatly troubled and pained by a hateful and annoying scruple—that God did not appear to them merciful and good, because He had never made Himself known to the Japanese before our arrival, especially if it were true that those who had not worshipped God as we preached were doomed to suffer everlasting punishment in hell. It seemed to them that He had forgotten and as it were neglected the salvation of all their ancestors, in permitting them to be deprived of the knowledge of saving truths, and thus to rush headlong on eternal death. It was this painful thought which, more than anything else, kept them back from the religion of the true God. But by the divine mercy all their error and scruple was taken away. We began by proving to them that the divine law is the most ancient of all. Before receiving their institutions from the Chinese, the Japanese knew by the teaching of nature that it was wicked to kill, to steal, to swear falsely, and to commit the other sins enumerated in the ten commandments, a proof of this being the remorse of conscience to which any one guilty of one of these crimes was certain to be a prey. We showed them that reason itself teaches us to avoid evil and to do good, and that this is so deeply implanted in the hearts of men, that all have the knowledge of the divine law from nature, and from God the Author of nature, before they receive any external instruction on the subject. . . . This being so, it necessarily follow that before any laws were made by men the divine law existed innate in the hearts of all men. The converts were so satisfied with this reasoning, as to see no further difficulty; so that this net having been broken, they received from us with a glad heart the sweet yoke of our Lord. . . .

The university of Bandou, situated in an island of Japan, which has given its name to its country, is the most famous of all; and a great number of bonzes are constantly going thither to study their own laws. These precepts are derived from China and are written in Chinese characters, which are different from the Japanese. There are two kinds of writing in Japan, one used by men and the other by women; and for the most part both men and women, especially of the nobility and the commercial class, have a literary education. The bonzes, or bonzesses, in their monasteries teach letters to the girls and boys, though rich and noble persons intrust the education of their children to private tutors.

The bonzes are persons of acute mind, and are very fond of studying, especially what relates to the future; they are fond of considering what will happen to them, what will be their end, and all questions of this nature. There were some of the bonzes who, in the course of their meditations, had come to believe that there was no way of saving souls in their system. They argued in this way: It is necessary above all things that there should exist a single origin of all things; now, in their books there is not a word on the subject, for there is a wonderful silence in them all as to the creation of the universe; and therefore if any of their predecessors were acquainted with this principle—a thing not confirmed by any authority, written or traditional—they must have kept the knowledge to themselves and hidden it from their descendants.

Now, men of this sort were wonderfully delighted with the divine law. One of them embraced the faith of Jesus Christ at Amanguchi, after being many years in the university of Bandou, where he had a flourishing reputation for learning. Before we came to Japan he had thought of becoming a bonze; afterwards he changed his mind and married. The reason he assigned for this change was, that he had seen the falsehood and emptiness of the Japanese religions, and therefore did not believe in them at all, but felt that he was bound to pay his homage to the Author and Creator of the universe. Our Christians were overjoyed at his accession, for he was and was thought to be the most learned man of the city. . . .

One of the things that most of all pains and torments these Japanese is, that we teach them that the prison of hell is irrevocably shut, so that there is no egress therefrom. For they grieve over the fate of their departed children, of their parents and relatives, and they often show their grief by their tears. So they ask us if there is any hope, any way to free them by prayer from that eternal misery, and I am obliged to answer that there is absolutely none. Their grief at this affects and torments them wonderfully; they almost pine away with sorrow. But there is this good thing about their trouble—it makes one hope that they will all be the more laborious for their own salvation, lest they, like their forefathers, should be condemned to everlasting punishment. They often ask if God cannot take their fathers out of hell, and why their punishment must never have an end. We gave them a satisfactory answer, but they did not cease to grieve over the misfortune of their relatives; and I can hardly restrain my tears sometimes at seeing men so dear to my heart suffer such intense pain about a thing which is already done with and can never be undone.

Opposite to Japan lies China, an immense empire, enjoying profound peace, and which, as the Portuguese merchants tell us, is superior to all Christian states in the practice of justice and equity. The Chinese whom I have seen in Japan and elsewhere, and whom I got to know, are white in colour, like the Japanese, are acute, and eager to learn. In intellect they are superior even to the Japanese. Their country abounds in plenty of all things, and very many cities of great extent cover its surface. The cities are very populous; the houses ornamented with stone roofings, and very elegant. All reports say that the empire is rich in every sort of produce, but especially in silk. I find, from the Chinese themselves, that amongst them may be found many people of many different nations and religions, and, as far as I could gather from what they said, I suspect that among them are Jews and Mahometans.

Nothing leads me to suppose that there are Christians there. I hope to go there during this year, 1552, and penetrate even to the Emperor himself. China is that sort of kingdom, that if the seed of the Gospel is once sown, it may be propagated far and wide. And moreover, if the Chinese accept the Christian faith, the Japanese would give up the doctrines which the Chinese have taught them. Japan is separated from Liampou (which is a principal town in China) by a distance of about three hundred miles of sea. I am beginning to have great hopes that God

will soon provide free entrance to China, not only to our Society, but to religious of all Orders, that a large field may be laid open to pious and holy men of all sorts, in which there may be great room for devotion and zeal, in recalling men who are now lost to the way of truth and salvation. I again and again beg all who have a zeal for the spreading of the Christian faith to help by their holy sacrifices and prayers these poor efforts of mine, that I may throw open an ample field to their pious labours. . . .

Source: Excerpt from *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, Volume 2, edited by Henry James Coleridge (London: Burns and Oates, 1890), pp. 331–350.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

The Japanese religion, unlike Christianity, had no creation myth. Nor was there the belief in one creator who was supremely good.