Inculturation on 16th Century Japan

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I had always thought of Alexandro Valignano, S.J. (1539-1606) as a pioneer of a new type of evangelization in the Catholic Church, a new movement that started already when S.F. Xavier arrived to Japan, but developed a lot during Valignano’s visitation of Japan. This movement can be considered as a precursor of what nowadays we call Inculturation. Let us see the main features of it.

1. Inter-religious Dialogue in Yamaguchi

The Missionaries of the 16th Century were not part of an Inter-Religious Dialogue as we know it today. Many times each other saw his rival as an evil to overcome. But, even if it wasn’t meant to be so, we can conclude that a real inter-religious dialogue took part in Yamaguchi, when the first Missionaries in Japan had a disputation with the Buddhist monks (year 1551). Xavier was not in Yamaguchi at that time, but he was still in Japan, so we can consider him also as part of this dialogue, as he was the leader of the
small group and the one who directed the style of preaching in Japan. Brother Fernandez was younger and had more time that Xavier and Torres to learn the Japanese Language. That’s why he was often given the spokesman role. Let us see a little of his report to Xavier about this disputation.

Fernandez and the people helping him (probably Lorenzo an other Japanese) were conscious about the language and cultural barriers.

The answers we gave them would not convince a scholar, as they were not enough from the theological or philosophical point of view, but I think these more concrete reasoning helped them better (Letter of Br. Fernandez to Xavier from Yamaguchi, October 20, 1551. I translate this and the following texts from the Spanish in DISPUTATIONEM)

To make things worse, the monks coming to discuss were from different sects, with different teachings and interpretations about their beliefs. According to the Missionaries records, there were 8 different groups of people coming to dispute. Among them we can identify Zen, Nichiren, Pure Land, Ikko, hokke.

Given the fact that they (and surely the Buddhist monks) couldn’t discuss freely, let us see what they talk.

Fernandez gives 11 questions the monks asked, a fact completely missing in other records. All other records about this disputation just mention the questions the Missionaries ask only. Comparing both, we can see that they use the word Deus as opposed to Buddha or Shaka.

[… so, there should be some Principle to give start to everything. This Principle has neither beginning nor end. In our language, we call this Principle Deus. (DISPUTATIONEM, 138)

Another fact to mention is that Br. Fernandez doesn’t judge the Monks words or views. He doesn’t call them strange, mistaken or superstitious. He just gives an accurate report to Xavier. Opposed to other records, among the
45 questions, Fernandez speaks of 8 agreements between Christian and Buddhism teachings.

18. They said: We know well the body’s flesh is made out of the Four Elements, but from which of them did god created the souls? We answered: When god created the elements, the sun, moon and everything else, He didn’t need any material to do so. He just created them from his word and Will. In the same way, the souls were created just from his word and Will.

The Missionaries use the creatio ex nihilo reasoning, but in Buddhist teaching Nothingness (Mu) is a central concept also, so probably the Buddhist monks understood that “Everything becomes (has its principle out of) from Nothingness”.

22. They asked: does god have flesh? And: Can people see god? We answered: Things that have some corpse that can be seen are made out of the Primitive Elements. God created those Primitive Elements. So, God cannot have a body made out of Elements. If god had a body out of the Elements, He couldn’t be the Creator.

24. We answer them: so, as the soul is closed inside the body, in this world we can’t see the soul. In the same way, we can’t see god either.

25. They said: Surely it is so. And so, the soul is god. The fact that the soul doesn’t have a body, makes it clear that it cannot be born or die.

From the text above, we can make some conclusions:

- The monks, following a coherent Pantheistic line of reasoning concluded the soul is god.
- The Missionaries kept the Creator-creature line clear, avoiding any Pantheistic interpretation.
- The disputation led to the basic confrontation between Creationist and Pantheistic positions.
• The disputation followed to god’s Justice, existence of Evil, delay of Encarnation, etc., So we can conclude that was theologically deep.
• The monks were able to find the non-philosophical points of Christianity.
• The Missionaries could see how much or little their argumentation was understood, and the way of reasoning the Oriental Religions had.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the reports sent to and edited in Europe used this information in a very sided way. To mention some important one, in his “History of Japan”, (~1595) while quoting Fernandez letter, Fr. Luis Fróis records only 19 points out of the 45 mentioned there. The same holds for the letters of Fernandez and Torres published in Alcalá, Coimbra and Évora. In all the “Official” records (Fróis, Guzman, Valignano, etc.), this disputation is taken as a one-side victory of the Missionaries against the “wrong” teachings of other Religions, while the people who took part in it didn’t mean that.

As a conclusion to this reflection, we can say that the fact that (in spite of the Language barrier) they could discuss this much speaks highly not only of the Missionaries zeal, but also of the receptiveness and interest of the Buddhist monks.

2. The “otherness” Found in Asia

From the Catholic view of the 16th Century, the Asian Religions were considered “pagans”. But the fact that the missionaries took the effort to dispute with them shows that the Missionaries (and through them, the Catholic Church) interpreted that these Asian Religions and their teachings could not just be ignored as happened in many other places in the world.
When we think that God is “The Other”, even the biggest differences among humans are still part of the same group of created and dependent beings. Because Valignano saw the Jesuit mission with the eyes of a believer, he could see the big cultural and religious differences as still able to communicate among them. Let me say something about Valignano’s interpretation about “the other”, in this case from his Asian experience. Valignano came to Japan as a visitator, which means that he was supposed to give a judgment about the situation and to propose the needed changes. In order to achieve that, Valignano used many facets that could help us to rethink our history as Church, Religious Order and as educational institutions.

Pointing at some of his different facets, we can say that Valignano was not only a missionary, but also a politician and a leader. Let me develop these points.

3. Christian Politics in Asia

Even before arriving to Japan, Valignano studied and made others study the Buddhist Sects actives in the country. His main concern was to know how to deal with them and how to prove that Christianity was the right religion. In the Obediencias he wrote and latter Fr. Pasio corrected, we can read the following passage:

In places of new conversions, let us proceed with maturity and prudence. Even if the local lord and many of his vassals become Christians, avoid making noise destroying his temples and other kind of repugnant things. Even when the converts desire to do so, they shouldn’t be allowed. The idols should be gathered and burned in secrecy and little by little. The temples should be transformed into churches or given other convenient use, so that they remain, preventing the gentiles saying that wherever we enter, we destroy and desolate
everything. (Valignano, *Obediencias* 1580-1612, cap. 10. I translated from the Spanish in *SUMARIO*, 167)

In this quote it is clear that Valignano is not interested in an inter-religious dialogue as such. He rather sees the negative influence of acting openly against the traditional Religions of Japan. This also shows that he foresaw that a mutual relation could not be avoided. In many other mission countries in the world, this mutual relation was seen as just a short period till Christianity was installed. So, in this Asian situation, he used his leadership to guide the Church to a new direction, not used yet in general.

4. Christian Leadership in Asia

As a leader, Valignano knew how to deal with “the others”, companions and enemies. This very tactical, political approach had also its negative effects. Right or not, the other Religious Orders missioning in Japan kept blaming the Jesuits of not being clear enough in their preaching just to avoid confrontation with the rulers. Following the same line, more than 10 years after the first Christian Prohibition Edict (1587) of Hideyoshi and during the open persecution of the Tokugawa Regime, Valignano was able to negotiate to have the preaching back as before.

The Christian lords were of the opinion that even when we didn’t have permission to preach in Japan, we could rest sure nobody would harm us, so we should have more freedom and rebuild the churches. So, we decided to rebuild the churches and restart the public preaching to children in all the places (of Nagasaki area). We also allowed all people to participate in the Masses and preaching. Finally, we also allowed the priests to have their ministries as in the beginning. With this, the Christians were much consoled. (Valignano, *To Fr.*
General Acquaviva, from Shiki, October 10, 1599. I translate this from Jap. Sin. 54, 82v)

Valignano uses his contacts and a delicate political balance in order to avoid a complete stop in the Mission. These political movements had their good result, but they were also dangerous in the general hostility of the Tokugawa Government. All the political efforts were not enough to avoid the persecution that was already growing.

5. Jesuit Style Mission in Asia

For a while, Valignano was the main organizer of the whole Asian mission. Because of his leader position he was able to notice that not only the words (Bateren, Iruman, Dojuku) but also the assignments in the Catholic Church were difficult to grasp. So, Valignano tried to apply them to the already known standards in order to make the organization of the Church better understood.

So, all the Fathers should use the rank the Elder Monks use. The Regional Superior should use the rank of the Five Great Monks in Gosan, and the Superior of Japan should use the rank of the Nanzenji Temple Master. (I translate from Italian in CERIMONIALE, 124-126)

Here we can see that Valignano makes a difference between the content of the preaching (that was not to be negotiated) and the means (Buddhist framework) or tools used for that. This was a dangerous try and, as far as the records tell us, it was not applied to the whole mission. It seems that in this point Valignano went too far ahead of the missionaries of his time.

I am not sure Valignano saw “rays of truth” in other religions, as Vatican II would express. But, and in this we should imitate him, he was aware of
an interlocutor that should not be ignored or despised. Let me quote some passages.

On preaching the Gospel, we should avoid mixing European customs not needed for the salvation of souls. Those customs are against the Japanese ones and are not only rejected, but they bring the refusal of the Gospel itself. For example, marrying with special conditions, to divide the inheritance according to our rules and things like that. Unless they are clearly against Divine Law, in these things we should follow the Japanese ways. (Valignano-Pasio, Obediencias, 1580-1612. From SUMARIO, 166)

To consult every matter with the Japanese Brothers or with our prudent friends it is very important to keep people esteem also. This is because the Japanese customs and courtesies are so different from the Nanban ones that without this advice we won’t be able to take the right decisions. (From CERIMONIALE, 151-152).

6. Japanizing the Mission

Probably through the influence of culturally refined Japanese like Takayama Ukon, Valignano saw the influence the tea ceremony could have in the apostolic work, and try to make the Jesuits able to relate with others in this area. Let us see some of his writings:

In our houses there should be an [Japanese style] entrance and Chanoyu (place to serve the Japanese Tea). And this should be taking in account when constructing any of our houses. The reason for this is that lacking these places it is an offense not only to the priest rank, but also to the guests. (From CERIMONIALE, 136)
It is worth noticing that Valignano doesn’t write: it is considered an offense, but: “it is an offense”, showing his understanding about this issue. Of course, he sees it as a needed tool for the Japan of that time.

He (the tea master Brother) will take care to know that the grinded tea will be enough for two or three days. If it is not enough, he will decide which tea should be grinded next. In case he is not able to do it himself he will have someone to do it. (*Rules for the Tea Master. I translate from Portuguese in Jap. Sin 2, 106v*)

For the Japanese of that time, the tea to be served expressed the heart of the host. For that reason, to serve a properly aged grounded tea would be interpreted as charitable treat from the sensitive guest. Needless to say, all that detailed ceremony was part of the culture of that time and it is not something we can apply nowadays. But, it is clear that it shows a deep respect for the culture in which they wanted to spread the Good News. This attitude is surely something we should imitate also nowadays. As an extension to this tea room use, the missionaries started to celebrate Mass there. Fr. Fróis left us the following lines:

Father (Fróis) was received in Kyoto (Miaco) by a very honest Christian named Anthony (Antão). He stayed there for 120 days, very well treated by him and his sons. To show better his joy and gladness (to have the Father with him) Anthony gave him his tea room (chanoyu) to stay. This is something that the Christians and gentiles have in high esteem, as the neatness of this room is well known in the area. In that tea room the Christians gathered and have Mass together. (From Portuguese in Fróis, *HISTORIA*, Vol 2, 264 (Part 1, f.301v)

With the enforcement of many of the Trent Council regulations, the doubts about the use of places like those for Mass kept growing even in places like Japan. Valignano, after consultation in and outside the country, gave the following directions:
Speaking about the needed decency of the place, we should judge it from the custom of this land, not by the European standards. So, Mass can be said in particular housed even of gentiles, as far as the altar is decently prepared (Valignano Obediencias; f. 138v. (From the quote in LA LITURGIA EN LA MISIÓN DEL JAPÓN DEL SIGLO XVI, 140)

We can see here that Valignano applies his leadership to decide a delicate matter in favor of a better proclamation of the Gospel in Japan, and the neighbor countries.

7. Inculturating The Spiritual Exercises

We have seen some ways of using local resources of Japan to help evangelization. But the Jesuits of that time were also able to japanize European resources. The center of Jesuit spirituality has always been the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. As in Europe the Latin edition was often enough, we find the surprising early Japanese translation and publication of this book in 1607. The book was published in a Romanized Japanese version that was very popular also among the Christians in general. The book was published under the name Spiritual Shugyo, with only a few extant copies in the World. It includes also other prayer and liturgy books, but it is mainly a prayers manual easy to understand and use. Some paragraphs may illustrate the style.

As we have seen, contemplation is for us like a mirror without mist. When we face this mirror, we are able to discern with the eyes of wisdom many things invisible to the bodily eyes, and we are able to progress in the spiritual life. (From Japanese of SPIRITUAL SHUGYO, f.1v)
We should accompany the rhythm of our breath with short prayers, concentrating our whole towards God. Like feeding wooden logs to a fire keeps it burning, we should train our hearts with our prayers so that our devotion doesn’t fade out. (Id, f.119)

As we can see, the text, far from being a direct translation from St. Ignatius book, includes images and wording that helped the Japanese of that time to get used to the Ignatian Spirituality. Even after 250 years of complete absence of priests in Japan, the Hidden Christians were able to show to the French Missionaries one of the copies treasured among them. After checking it, without knowing the origin of the book, Fr. Petitjean wrote about it:

A treatise about the contrition written in 1603 (1607) is one of the most rich works we had found. One would say that the authors of this book were previewing the long priest-shortage that was to hit the Japanese Church. This book is a milestone in the clarity of doctrine and in the easy style used. Understood and put in good practice, it must have been a sustain for the souls that had the misfortune of offending God after their baptism. (I translate from the French manuscript of Fr. Petitjean’s letter dated June 30, 1865)

We can conclude that the Jesuits use Ignatian Spirituality in a creative way and that they were able to adapt it to the Japanese culture in a deep way.

Needless to say, all this movement was not the work of Valignano alone, but the common effort of many of the members, so I think we have a lot to learn from them.
8. Final Remarks

Many times in Japan, people ask me if I consider Valignano a pioneer of Inculturation. I think that he was a pioneer of Inculturation in a broad sense, but we have to make a distinction between adaptation and Inculturation. Nowadays, to speak about Inculturation seems even fashionable, but we have to admit that we haven not reached the real Inculturation yet. Adaptation is the first needed step in order to start any evangelization, but it is not necessarily Inculturation. In my opinion, as far as we think that the other has to change to understand me, we are still not in the right path. The day we feel that we have also to change in order to find together a new way of preaching the Gospel of Jesus, we will be, as Valigano and others did, in our limited way of approaching a better evangelization. Let us learn from history and add our new, original way of deepening it.

Let me end by saying that the Jesuits missionaries in Asia learned from the other world examples (as South America and other places), and tried (with the expectable limitations) to develop new ways of preaching the Gospel.
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