

St. Francis Xavier's Disturbing Account of Japanese Reactions to Eternal Hell

Intro:

St. Francis Xavier, born in 1506 in the Kingdom of Navarre, stands as a pivotal figure in the history of Christian missionary work. A co-founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), Xavier dedicated his life to the spread of Christianity, profoundly influencing religious landscapes across Asia. Educated at the University of Paris, where he met Ignatius of Loyola, Xavier's missionary journey took him to India, Japan, and the Malay Archipelago. Renowned for his linguistic ability, cultural sensitivity, and zealous commitment, he left a lasting imprint on the regions he evangelized. Xavier's extraordinary efforts were recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, leading to his canonization as a saint. His enduring legacy continues to be celebrated for its significant contributions to global Christianity.

In his writings, Xavier meticulously chronicled his missionary experiences, providing not only valuable historical insights but also sometimes unsettling accounts of his encounters. Among these, we present his account of how the Japanese perceived the Christian doctrine of eternal damnation. This particular narrative stands out as one of the most challenging and painful writings relating to Christian missionary endeavours.

Excerpts from *The Life And Letters Of St. Francis Xavier*, Volume 2:

The King was made favourable to us by the letters and presents sent by the Bishop and the Governors from India and Malacca, and we obtained from him without difficulty the publication of edicts declaring his approval of the promulgation of the divine law in the cities of his dominions, and permitting such of his subjects as pleased to embrace it. When he had done us this favour he also assigned a monastery to us for a residence. Here by means of daily sermons and disputes with the bonzes, the sorcerers, and other such men, we converted to the religion of Jesus Christ a great number of persons, several of whom were nobles. Amongst them we found some able to inform us, and we made it our business to gain acquaintance with the various sects and opinions of Japan, and so know how to refute them by arguments and proofs prepared for the purpose.

The bonzes seeing themselves betrayed by their own adherents and conquered in public disputes, were in the greatest trouble and bursting with indignation, especially because the new converts

openly declared that they were induced to profess the Christian religion by perceiving that the bonzes, who were the teachers of the religion of their fathers, could not defend it.

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 pre-eminence 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 be for ever without pity for those who suffer therein the most fearful torments for 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 mind. 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 for sowing the seed of religion in their minds.

Only one of the nine sects prevailing in Japan teaches that souls are mortal, but this sect is considered detestable by the followers of the rest. Its adherents are extremely vicious and corrupt, and cannot endure to hear hell mentioned.

In the course of two months, after numerous conferences, we baptized about five hundred persons at Amanguchi, 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.

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. If any doubts were entertained on the matter, an experiment might be made in the person of a man without any instruction, living in absolute solitude, and in entire ignorance of the laws of his country. Such a man, ignorant of and a stranger to all human teaching, if he were asked whether it were or were not criminal to kill, to steal, or to commit the other actions forbidden by the law of God, and whether it were right to abstain from such actions, then, I say, this man, so fundamentally without all human education, would most certainly reply in such a manner as to show that he was by no means without knowledge of the divine law. Whence then must he be supposed to have received this knowledge, but from God Himself, the Author of nature? And if this

knowledge is seen among barbarians, what must be the case with civilized and polished nations? 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.

But our greatest enemies are the bonzes, because we expose their falsehoods. As I have said, they used to make the people believe that it is impossible for persons in general to keep those five commandments which I mentioned, and that, therefore, they would observe them for the people, on condition of the people giving them maintenance and honour. They give their word that if any one has to go down into hell he will be delivered by their intervention and labour. We, on the contrary, proved to the people that in hell there is no redemption, and that no one can be rescued from it by the bonzes and bonzesses. Convinced by our arguments, the people complained that the bonzes had deceived them. At last, by the help of God, the bonzes themselves were forced to confess the truth that they could not save any one from the punishment of hell by their prayers, but that unless they gave out that they had this power, they would infallibly be reduced to die of hunger.

And indeed, soon after this, the bonzes, as the assistance they received from their disciples gradually failed, experienced great difficulties as to their maintenance, and had to live in a state of degradation. We have had such sharp disputes with them on the subject of hell, that it does not seem likely that they will ever be reconciled to us. A great number have already left their rule and returned to secular life; and these men expose to us the frauds and tricks of the bonzes who live in the convents. Thus (at Amanguchi, at least) the credit of the bonzes and bonzesses diminishes much every day. The Christians have assured me that of a hundred convents which there used to be there, a great part will soon cease to exist, being deprived of the alms of the inhabitants.

Formerly the bonzes and bonzesses who had broken one of their five precepts were punished with death by the princes and nobles of the places where they lived, whether they were found guilty of offences against morals, or theft, or of falsehood, or whether they had committed homicide, or caused the death of any living creature, or eaten flesh of such, or drunk wine. But at present this discipline is entirely relaxed and corrupted; the greater number drink wine, eat meat secretly, make a trade of lies, openly indulge in fornication, and commonly have boys living with them, whom they corrupt in the flower of their youth. This they themselves profess, and they declare it to be no sin, and the people on their authority indulge in the same abominable crime. They commonly say that if it is lawful for the bonzes, why not for secular people? Besides this, they keep a number of women in their monasteries, who they say are the wives of the men who till their farms. This gives great scandal to the people, who look with suspicion on the great

intercourse the bonzes have with the women. The bonzes also visit the bonzesses at all hours, for purposes of business, and receive visits from them in the same way. The people look on this with an evil eye. They say there is a certain herb which the bonzesses eat that they may not become pregnant. For my part, it does not astonish me that the bonzes are covered with so many and so great sins. They are a set of men who have the devil in the place of God, and it is a matter of necessity that they should commit crimes innumerable and abominable.

All the Japanese use a long rosary of beads in their prayers, invoking the founder of their sect at each bead. The different sects recite their series of prayers, some more frequently, others more seldom. The principal founders of the religions, as we have mentioned, are Xaca and Amida. The grey bonzes and bonzesses and most of the people chiefly venerate Amida; the rest of the people do not leave Amida out, but render most honour to Xaca. I have carefully inquired whether this Xaca and Amida were persons celebrated for their wisdom, and have begged the Christians to give me an account of their lives in writing. At last I have discovered from their books that they were not men at all, for they are said to have lived a thousand or even two thousand years. Xaca was born eighty thousand times over; and many other such things are handed down by tradition about them which can never have happened. So that I conclude that they were not men, but mere inventions or portents of the devil.

I earnestly beg all who read this letter of mine, by the zeal they have for the propagation of the worship of God, to pray that our Lord Jesus Christ will give us the victory over these two demons Xaca and Amida, and over the others like them, especially since at present their credit is waxing weak at Amanguchi, not without the special providence of God. A principal nobleman of this kingdom and his wife, a person of great merit, have shown us so much affection, that their efforts have never been wanting to us in spreading our divine religion; but although they both know its truth, they can neither of them be induced to embrace it. Their reason is that they have built at their own expense a great many monasteries for bonzes, and assigned them revenues in order that the bonzes may constantly pray to Amida to preserve them from the calamities and miseries of this life, and bring them one day to that happiness which he himself enjoys.

These two gave a hundred reasons besides for not becoming Christians; but the principal was that having always been great worshippers of Xaca and Amida, and having given for their sakes large gifts to the bonzes, and built a great number of monasteries, they would, if they were to pass over to the Christian religion, lose the accumulated good of so many years of devotion, and all the fruit of their past life. They are convinced that all the money they have given to the bonzes in the names of Xaca and Amida will be returned to them with large interest after their death, together with an abundant recompense of their worship and devotion. So, not to lose these advantages, they steadily refuse to be converted to Jesus Christ.

The Japanese believe that in the abode of the blessed there will be splendid banquets and all the good things of life in plenty and elegance, so that the more pleasing a person has been to Xaca and Amida, the higher he will be in greatest glory. All these stories make up the mysteries and fables of the bonzes, who, with the object of destroying the effects of our preaching, used to preach themselves in their own temples, and most shamefully revile both us and our God in the midst of a vast multitude of hearers. The God of the Christians, they said, is something unknown and unheard of; He can only be the greatest and most abominable of devils. We were the disciples of this demon, so that every one should take care not to embrace the faith of Jesus Christ, for that no sooner should He be adored as God than Japan will perish. They also made a captious interpretation of the name of God, saying that it is the same as 'Diusa,' which in their language means a lie; 'so let them look to themselves, and be diligently on their guard against us.'

Such and many other such impious calumnies they uttered against God, Who nevertheless, in His infinite mercy and clemency, turned all to His own glory and to the good of souls. In fact their false charges against us increased our authority with the people, and the number of our Lord's worshippers was daily swelled. The people saw clearly, and said openly that the jealousy of the bonzes was the cause of their accusations against us.

I have tried long and diligently in this country to discover from all indications whether the Japanese have ever had the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and I have at last found from their books and conversations that they have never heard anything at all of Him. At Cagoxima, where we remained a year, I noticed that the prince and his relations had a white cross in the armorial bearings of their family, but that they were entirely ignorant of the name of Jesus Christ

When I was at Amanguchi with Father Cosmo Torres and Joam Fernandez, the King of Boungo, one of the most powerful of the country, wrote to ask me to go to him; a Portuguese vessel had come into his harbour, and he wished to talk with me on certain subjects. So, both to find out how he was affected towards our holy religion, and to pay a visit to the Portuguese, I set out at once for Boungo, leaving Cosmo and Joam with the Christians. The King gave me a most gracious reception, and it was a great pleasure to me to meet with the Portuguese. While I was at Boungo the devil stirred up a great war at Amanguchi. A powerful nobleman declared war against the King, drove him from his capital, and stripped him of his dominions. The latter seeing no way of escape, and not choosing to fall alive into the hands of a furious adversary, so lately his subject and servant, plunged a dagger into his bowels, and killed himself, at the same time causing his son who was with him to be put to death, and ordering both bodies to be burned, that the enemy might find no remains to insult. All was done as he ordered. You may judge from the letters written to me by our brethren at Amanguchi, which I send you, how great was the peril they incurred in that war. After the King's death, the nobles and grandees of the kingdom having successfully ended the war, and

seeing that the state of Amanguchi could not stand without a sovereign, sent ambassadors to the King of Boungo, begging him to send his own brother to Amanguchi, whom they would make king. The King of course complied with their request, and so his brother became King of Amanguchi. The King of Boungo commands numerous and very warlike troops, and as things go with Japanese kings, has vast dominions to govern. He has a great liking for the Portuguese. No sooner was he informed of the power and character of the King of Portugal than he wrote to him asking to be admitted into the number of his friends, and sending him a rich suit of armour as a token of friendship. He has also sent an envoy to the Viceroy of India, offering him with many compliments his friendship, alliance, and good offices; this messenger, who came to India with me, has been most honourably and liberally received by the Viceroy. Before I left Japan, the King of Boungo promised the Portuguese and myself to take Cosmo Torres and Joam Fernandez under his protection. The sovereign elect of Amanguchi bound himself in the same way, when he enters into the possession of his kingdom.

During our residence in Japan, that is to say for two years and a half, we lived at the expense of the munificent King of Portugal. His Highness had ordered more than a thousand gold crowns to be given to us as alms for our journey to Japan. It is incredible how much this excellent monarch has favoured us, and how much he has spent and daily continues to spend on our colleges and residences, and for the supply of all our necessities.

I had been some time at Boungo, when the opportune presence of the Portuguese vessel invited me to give up the idea of returning to Amanguchi; and I made up my mind to sail from Boungo for India, in order, after so long a separation, to revisit our fathers and brothers, and to provide members of the Society fitted for the work of cultivating the Japanese mission, as well as other necessary things quite wanting out there. I reached Cochin on the 24th January, and I was received in the kindest manner by the Governor. Next April some fathers will be sent to Japan from India, and the King of Boungo's ambassador will return home in their company. I have very great hopes that, by the favour of Jesus Christ, there will be a plentiful harvest in these countries; for a nation so ingenious, moderate, so desirous of instruction, so much guided by right reason and so well adorned with other eminent qualities, ought to be, as it were, a rich and fertile field from whence copious and joyful results may be expected.

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 entrust 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 first principle – a thing not confirmed by any authority, written or traditional – they must have kept the knowledge to themselves and hid 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 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.

Later on, if God wills, fresh members of the Society will be sent to Japan every year, and a house of the Society will be established at Amanguchi, where the fathers will learn the language of the country, and acquaint themselves with the doctrines and rules of the different sects. By these means the good and learned members of the Society who are to come hither from Portugal to aid the university of Bandou, will find brothers there acquainted with the language and the religions of Japan. This will be an immense advantage to the European fathers to whose lot this mission may fall.

At present Cosmo Torres and Joam Fernandez are entirely occupied in teaching the mysteries of our religion, and in preaching to the people on the wonderful deeds of our Lord. Many of their hearers are so affected by the history of the life of Jesus Christ, that they cannot hear the account of His passion and death without weeping and tears. Cosmo writes the sermons in our language, and Fernandez, who knows that of the country well enough, translates them into Japanese. Through their labours the Christians are advancing greatly in piety. The converts, who used formerly to recite that series of prayers on their beads, invoking each the founder of his own sect

on the several beads, have now learnt how to worship Jesus Christ, and are being formed in piety, and change their old superstitions into prayers in the honour of God.

They are so attentive and anxious for information in matters of this sort, that when taught to make the sign of the Cross, they insist on understanding what is the meaning of the words, '*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*' – why, as the right hand is lifted to the head, we say, '*In the name of the Father*'; why, when it is lowered to the breast, we add, '*And of the Son*;' and why, lastly, when it is moved from the left to the right shoulder, we say, '*And of the Holy Ghost*.' They are delighted with the explanation of all these things. When they are taught to say, '*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison*' they want to know the meaning of the words. And in saying our Lady's rosary, after the Angelical Salutation, at each small bead they repeat the names of Jesus and Mary as an invocation. They learn all these, as well as the other prayers and the Creed, by degrees, out of a written copy.

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.¹

RU.org highlights the historical diversity in Christian beliefs about hell, emphasizing that the views of St. Francis Xavier are not the sole representation of Christian thought, either historically or in the present day. A notable example of this diversity is found in John Kent's 1880 work, 'Eternal Burning, a Scandal Against the Almighty,' where he emphatically states:

“The doctrine of Eternal Burning has become so firmly rooted in the mind of man, that all the sects of Christendom, with few exceptions, whilst claiming to worship the Almighty as

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a God of Justice, of Mercy, and of Love,—a God Who so loved even fallen—sinful humanity, that He gave His only begotten Son to die for them, teach that He is a God of Insatiable Vengeance, Whose wrath nothing but the Eternal Burning of the wicked in a Lake of Fire and Brimstone can appease. They teach that He is never satisfied with punishing them, for they are always being punished; and that the narrowest limit to His Vengeance is, having them always Burning in Hell. This I pronounce a damnable heresy, and claim, as the Scriptures teach, that Death is the result of Sin,—that the punishment of Sin is Death, and that the Everlasting Death will be the Everlasting Punishment...”²

In contemporary times, there is a strong and positive movement among many Christians to rethink the common notion that hell is literally eternal. It is plausible that in the coming decades, the majority of Christians who still believe in hell will no longer believe that it is eternal.

Rabbi Morris Joseph published a significant work in 1903 titled '*Judaism as Creed and Life*,' presenting a Jewish viewpoint on this topic:

The idea of eternal punishment is repugnant to the genius of Judaism. Here and there a Rabbi may be found advocating the notion; but such teaching does not represent true Jewish doctrine. Nay, it does not represent the doctrine of any rational religion. God is supremely just, and He cannot conceivably inflict upon fallible man, prone to error, beset by fierce temptations, endless torments for his sins in this life. "He knoweth our frame. He will remember that we are dust." Experience confirms us in this belief. The punishments of this life are limited. The pangs of outraged conscience do not endure. There comes a time when we have the joyous sense of being at peace once more with God, when we may justly say to the torrent of remorse, "thus far and no further." And surely the tranquillity that is possible for us here will not be denied us in the future life. How beautiful, how obviously true, is the cry of the Prophet, speaking in God's name: "I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth, for the spirit would fail before Me and the souls which I have made." [Isaiah 57:16]

This compassion for frail humanity, this fatherly consideration of God for the souls He has made, is a reality full of consoling significance for us as regards both this life and the next. Even for the sinful soul, rebellious though it has been, there is eternal hope. Its revolt expiated, the heavenly gates will be flung open, so that it too may enter. Very beautifully

does an old Jewish writer conceive the righteous as pleading with God hereafter on behalf of the transgressors. "Go forth and heal them," is the Divine response to their intercession. And thus sought out and redeemed, the wicked rise into the life everlasting.³

Read *The Life and Letters*: <https://archive.org/details/LifeLettersOfStFrancisXavierV2/page/335/mode/2up>

Read *Judaism as Creed and Life*: <https://archive.org/details/judaismascreedli00jose/page/146/mode/2up>

Read *Eternal Burning*: <https://archive.org/details/eternalburningsc00kent/page/n13/mode/2up>

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