

Jesuit Missionaries in East Asia: Interreligious Dialogue and Intercultural Comparison in the 16th/17th Century

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1. Introduction: Definition of Terms and Description of Contexts

“Interreligious dialogue”, in a wide sense may be used to describe all kinds of conversation between adherents of different religious traditions, even if the participants make use of polemics. In a strict sense, it may be defined as presupposing the readiness and willingness on both sides to learn from the other side. For the historian of religions, it will be sufficient to define “dialogue” as being based on rationality, which means excluding polemics, and taking place in a non-violent context.¹

“Intercultural comparison”, in a wide sense may be used to describe all kinds of comparing phenomena from different cultural contexts, as, for instance, gestures of prayer or kinds of sacrifice in different religions of the world. In a strict sense, and more relevant for the History of Religions, it may be defined as presupposing the ability and willingness to distinguish between the visible form and the non-visible intention or meaning of religious phenomena, as, for instance, prayer or sacrifice.²

Jesuit missionaries arrived in Japan in the middle of the 16th century, in the beginning working quite successfully, even making some converts among members of the ruling class.³ In the early 17th century, however, the Shogun of the Tokugawa Clan, who had come to power in Japan recently, developed a hostile attitude towards European missionaries and in 1614 issued an edict

1 Cf. BERNER, Ulrich, Zur Geschichte und Problematik des interreligiösen Dialoges, in: ELSAS, Christoph (ed.), *Tradition und Translation. Zum Problem der interkulturellen Übersetzbarkeit religiöser Phänomene*. Festschrift Carsten Colpe. De Gruyter: Berlin / New York 1994, p. 402.

2 Philosopher of religion Dewi Z. Phillips, for instance, has reflected upon the various intentions of prayer. Cf. BERNER, Ulrich, Das Gebet aus der Sicht der analytischen Religionsphilosophie, in: BERNER, Ulrich u.a. (eds.), *Opfer und Gebet in den Religionen*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh 2005, pp. 90-92.

3 Cf. BOXER, C.R., *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*. University of California Press: Berkeley u.a. 1974, S. 78f.