



The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth Century Japan

J.F. Moran

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The Japanese and the Jesuits examines the attempt by sixteenth century Jesuits to convert the Japanese to Christianity. Directing the Jesuits was the Italian Alessandro Valignano, whose own magisterial writings, many of them not previously translated or published, are the principle source material for this account of one of the most remarkable of all meetings between East and West.

Valignano arrived in Japan in 1579. In promoting Christianity, he always sought the support of the ruling classes, but an important part of his strategy was also to have the missionaries adapt themselves thoroughly to Japanese customs, etiquette and culture. He was insistent that they must master the Japanese language, and he brought to Japan a European printing press, which turned out grammars and dictionaries for the missionaries, and works of instruction and devotion for the Japanese Christians.

Following Valignano's death, Christianity was proscribed and missionaries banished from Japan. This does not detract from his remarkable achievements. He understood perfectly well that foreign missionaries by themselves were not capable of converting Japan to Christianity, and one of his principal concerns was the training of Japanese Jesuits and priests, and breaking down the barriers between them and the Europeans. Few people have ever been more acutely aware of, or grappled more determinedly with, problems in Japanese-Western relationships.

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