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Jacques Proust

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jacques Proust,

La Supercherie Dévoilée. Une réfutation du Catholicisme au Japon au XVII^e siècle
(Paris: Éditions Chandeigne, 1998)

Among the various personalities that compose the complex and dramatic history of the Jesuit missionary enterprise in Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, few are as tragic as Cristóvão Ferreira. Indeed the life of this Jesuit has all the ingredients of a major drama. Born around 1580 in Portugal, Ferreira was sent to Asia and lived as a missionary in Japan from 1609 to 1633. Exercising his apostolate under the extreme conditions of the Tokugawa's persecution, he came to be an admired and respected missionary, reaching the top of the Jesuit hierarchy in Japan. In 1633 he was captured and apostatized after five hours of torture. He then became Sawano Chuan, the most famous of the "fallen priests", and collaborated with the Japanese authorities, to the point of being present at the trials of other captured Jesuits. Cristóvão Ferreira died in Nagasaki in 1650.

It is no surprise that such a life has already inspired books, films, and all types of speculations. Scholarly attention has not been meagre, either. The funda-

mental study on Ferreira is still the one by Hubert Cieslik ("The case of Cristóvão Ferreira", *Monumenta Nipponica*, 29 (1974) 1-54), but before and after Cieslik many others have directed their attention to this dramatic story. Two studies deserve special attention: Masaharu Anesaki, "Japanese Criticisms and Refutations of Christianity in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, 7 (1930) 1-15, and George Ellison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

The core of *La Supercherie dévoilée* is the translation of a text refuting Christianity written by Cristóvão Ferreira in 1636, three years after his capture and apostasy. This occupies pages 63 to 95 of the book. A lengthy "Introduction" precedes it (pp. 8-57), and a "Petit dictionnaire" (pp. 97-142) and abundant "Notes" (pp. 143-181) complete the work. The idea of translating this text to a Western language is not new. George Ellison had already translated it to English, and Proust merely translates this English version to French – but collating with a 1927 Japanese edition and introducing some different criteria and a few variations.

But in writing *La Supercherie dévoilée* Jacques Proust has a wider objective than merely providing a new translation of Ferreira's text. In the introduction he states his ambitious goal: to clarify "le mystère de Ferreira". The mystery, of course, lies in understanding Ferreira's personality. In particular, solving this mystery is nearly equivalent to ascertaining if his rejection of Christianity was a result of the horrible torture he suffered (which renders his subsequent collaboration with Japanese authorities in need of some explanation) or if it was the culmination of a sincere and intimate process of alienation of Christian belief (which makes it difficult to understand his life as a Jesuit). These are questions that have interested all persons that wrote about Ferreira, but Proust addresses these issues with some novelty. It must be pointed out that on these questions, that have intrigued so many before him, Jacques Proust has no doubts whatsoever. More than once he declares that when Ferreira was thrown in the pit of the *ana-tsurushi* he was already a man without certainties. To Proust, it seems clear that Ferreira had already abandoned Christianity before his capture.

The author tries to show, by an internal examination of the text written by Ferreira, and by an analysis of the training and influences he had received, that the Jesuit was acquainted with much non-orthodox materials and that this progressively eroded his belief in Catholic faith and in the value of the

missionaries' efforts. This is an interesting approach, not very common in the historiography of the Jesuits in Japan. A careful study of the education, mindset and cultural background of these Jesuit missionaries has never been performed. The common assertion that these missionaries had a "scholastic training" is much too vague to be of any use. Jacques Proust is quite right in doubting that the mentality of a seventeenth century Jesuit can be described in such narrow terms. Thus, a more precise characterization of the intellectual world of these Jesuit missionaries is a very interesting task.

Unfortunately, I am not of the opinion that Jacques Proust has succeeded in his purpose. Some minor errors reveal a fragile command of the Jesuits' educational system at the time of Ferreira's formation. It is said that Ferreira had classes at the University of Coimbra (p. 11), which he certainly never did. He attended the Jesuit College at Coimbra - a very different institution. It is also stated that he had been taught in mathematics and cosmography (p. 27). This is indeed possible, but very unlikely. At the period there were no regular classes of mathematics in Coimbra, only infrequent private courses. The same applies to his sojourn in Macao. Proust also informs the reader that Fernão Mendes Pinto was one of Francis Xavier's fellow Jesuits in Japan (p. 50) - a rather serious error in a book such as this.

But all these are, one should concede, minor objections. Taking into

consideration the strategy that Proust develops – analyzing Ferreira’s mind from the education received and the influences he had possibly been exposed to – I find it more serious the fact that Proust ignores the massive production of Post-tridentine theology, and systematically refers to medieval authors when discussing Ferreira’s doctrinal background. For the questions that Proust discusses, books such as Melchior Cano’s, *De locis theologicis* (1563), the immensely influential work of Roberto Bellarmino, *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos* (1586-93), or Benito Pereyra’s, *Commentariorum et disputationum in Genesim tomi quatuor* (1591-1595), were certainly much more relevant in shaping Ferreira’s mind than the medieval Thomas Aquinas or Averroes – the first considered by Proust to be Ferreira’s main source. Moreover, these works, and many others of the period, are of a controversial nature and would provide Ferreira with the knowledge of the ample arsenal of critiques directed against Catholic doctrine. I do not think it is necessary to proceed along the extremely hypothetical and rarified path of trying to figure out obscure and indirect ways for a Jesuit to be acquainted with heterodoxy. It seems to me that in this regard Proust speculates somewhat excessively. He speculates on the diffusion of erasmian notions in Italy and their possible influence in the Italian missionaries in Japan; he speculates on the possible influence of the New-Christians in Japan. These are all interesting

questions. Moreover, Proust treats them with ease and in a learned manner. But I find the final result very far from convincing.

The problem I see with the text written by Cristóvão Ferreira lies precisely in the fact that it agrees *too* well with what would be expected of him. A leading and well-known Jesuit writing three years after his apostasy of Christianity should state clearly his absolute rejection of Catholic doctrine, the evilness of its morals, the absurdity of its principles. All this should be accomplished in a highly informed manner, as far as possible from within the *corpus* of Christian doctrine itself. More than a mere rejection of Christianity, the Japanese authorities would certainly want of Ferreira proofs of the *inconsistency* of Catholic faith, from inside. All this Ferreira performs dutifully. To use such a text to substantiate a real and personal rejection of Christianity prior to the apostasy is an enterprise that I consider to be extremely risky.

In sum, the rendering of such an important text in French, thus making it accessible to a wider audience, is a laudable task even when considering that an English translation was easily available. But the project that Jacques Proust attempts, of trying to prove a real rejection of Christianity on the part of Ferreira from the analysis of the text is highly disputable and, at least in this reviewer’s opinion, far from convincing. I feel that, besides widening the audience

for such a text, in what concerns a better understanding of the personality of Cristóvão Ferreira not much was gained in relation to previous works. But I also feel that Proust's emphasis on the importance of intellectual aspects and on the complex variety of influences that could affect a seventeenth century Jesuit is challenging and deserves attention.

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Diálogo sobre a Missão dos Embaixadores Japoneses à Cúria Romana, (pref., translation from Latin and notes by Américo da Costa Ramalho), Macao, Comissão Territorial de Macau para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses – Fundação Oriente, 1997, 353 p.

In 1590, the work entitled *De Missione Legatorum Iaponensium ad Romanam Curiam ...* was printed and published by the missionary centre of the Jesuits in Macao.

After its first edition, this work had been partially translated and re-edited, but only in 1997, with the present edition of *De Missione Legatorum*, we can count on the first integral translation of this source on a modern language such as Portuguese. This meritorious work is due to Prof. Américo da Costa Ramalho, who, during the translating process had also

studied all the facts concerning the text and his author. The Portuguese edition appears with a preface that resumes the most pertinent conclusions of such study.

Upon Alessandro Valignano, S. J., Visitor of the Japanese mission and the mentor of this work, it completed a trilogy of printed books, planned for the conversion of Japan, as he defended among the students of the local seminaries, to whom he had begun to write some words of presentation. After having made all efforts to teach them the principles of the Christian faith, namely writing the *Catechismus Christianae Fidei in quo Veritas nostrae religionis ostenditur et sectae Iaponenses confutatur*, printed in 1586, and also after having promoted the publication of *Christiani Pueri Institutio*, written by João Bonifácio, S. J., and edited in 1588, work which Valignano believed illustrated the good virtues concerning costumes, it remained to present to the Japanese people the European civilisation, unfortunately unknown in the far-east.

Since the beginning of the Padroado's missions in Japan, the distance that separated the two civilisations had contributed to some misunderstandings, mostly because of the lack of a political, social and cultural framing of the foreign missionaries that approached the Japanese territory. As a matter of fact, those men were often seen with some discredit. For instance, when they preached the Christian poverty, not easily attractive, they were equalised to lower classes, losing their social influence.