

## Article

# All or Nothing: Polemicizing God and the Buddhist Void in the Jesuit Mission to East Asia

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**Abstract:** The Jesuit mission to East Asia highlights the polemical difficulties inherent in the process of introducing, translating, and creating a new theological paradigm within a host culture without a common religious worldview. Both Matteo Ricci in China and Ricci's erstwhile teacher, Alessandro Valignano, in Japan, both inveighed against Buddhism for positing a "void" as the Absolute rather than God. The East Asian Jesuit mission had an incomplete understanding of what emptiness/nothingness/void referred to until the native Japanese convert and former Zen monk, Fukansai Habian, took up the mantle as the Jesuit polemicist against native systems of thought, in particular, Buddhism. Whereas Ricci and Valignano attacked the "void" within the context of a negation of "something", Habian correctly understood the void as akin to the pleroma, the fullness of possibility, and the creative principle, but used his more nuanced understanding as a polemical expedient to deny or negate all Buddhist doctrines as expressing nothingness (which he erroneously equates with the void), even such form-affirming schools as the Pure Land school with its clearly defined goal of a physical post-mortem Pure Land. The polemical paradigm engendered by this encounter also served as the starting point for Buddhism's appearance in the Western imagination. This paper will make a comparative investigation of the polemical discourse between the Jesuits and Buddhists regarding the Absolute and demonstrate how this historical instance would have far-reaching consequences that have ongoing relevance regarding the interplay of Christian and Buddhist teachings.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Christianity; interfaith polemics; Jesuit mission to East Asia; Francis Xavier



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## 1. Introduction

The use of cataphatic (affirmative) and apophatic (negative) approaches to discussion and discourse on the ultimate in religious discourse exists in varied traditions across time and space. Each represents a discrete method that attempts to give expression to that which is ultimately beyond all expression. Although this terminology itself is traditionally used in Catholic theology, its origins are found in the writings of the sixth-century author Pseudo-Dionysius. St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* can be taken as a well-known example of the latter approach in its use of images and anthropomorphic language to affirm God's goodness, leading to an ever-increasing scope that could eventually posit God as the "all" that is good, right, and just. Apophatic spirituality, on the other hand, takes a negative approach to God that is devoid of applicable images and words, and by divesting the Godhead of all ideas and modes of thought, it eventually arrives at a "nothing" "nothing", a cloud or darkness of unknowing. It is within this cloud or darkness of unknowing that the individual soul and the Godhead are revealed to be of one non-dual essence. The Jesuits would not have been unfamiliar with this approach, as Ignatius of Loyola was himself a founding member of the order. In the generation after Ignatius's death, prominent Jesuits made their way to East Asia, where they encountered, for the first time, East Asian spiritual systems. Among the great East Asian traditions of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and, in Japan, Shintoism, it was Buddhism that proved to be the greatest challenge with its massive textual tradition, strong and organized institutional structure, and clear eschatology. One could posit that the three most polemically

prominent and effective Jesuits were: Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), and Fukansai Habian 不干斎ハビアン (1565–1621), who respectively wrote the works: *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主実義 (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), *Nihon no katekizumo* 日本のカテキズモ (The Japanese Catechism), and *Myōtei Mondō* 妙貞問答 (The Myōtei Dialogues).<sup>1</sup> These figures and their works take up the central and most challenging issue of their mission—communicating the discourse of the Judeo-Christian Deity within a religious culture that does not posit a single, omnipotent divine being. Rather than having a common foundation, it appeared to the Jesuits that the Buddhists (particularly the Zen Buddhists) merely posited a “void” or “nothingness” that they took as the ultimate truth. This historical episode served as the West’s introduction to East Asian Buddhism, which set the tone of the polemical discourse that would define this intercultural encounter until the modern period.

## 2. Historical and Cultural Context

While the Jesuit mission came to Japan before China, the Middle Kingdom’s history with Christianity has a much earlier terminus a quo. One can trace its origins back nearly 1500 years to the appearance of the Nestorian Church (also known as the “Syrian” or “Church of the East”) during the early Tang dynasty. Known in Chinese as *Jingjiao* 景教, or “luminous teaching”, this form of Christianity made certain inroads during the Tang dynasty, as evidenced in the Xi’an Stele of 781, which tells of the 150-year history it had enjoyed in China, including the story of the Assyrian missionary Alopen, whose missionizing efforts resulted in recognition by the second ruler of the Tang, Emperor Taizong (Jenkins 2008, p. 65). While such an auspicious beginning boded well for the continued spread of Christianity throughout China and greater East Asia, the religion had a hard time recovering from Emperor Wuzong’s Huaichang Persecution of Buddhism 會昌毀佛 (Ch. *Huichang huifo*; 841–845), which included not only Buddhism but also other foreign religions. With the fall of the Tang dynasty and the termination of its imperial support, Christianity disappeared from Chinese soil, although it was able to flourish again for a brief period under the religiously tolerant Mongols. Nevertheless, as its adherents were largely non-Han Chinese, it did not lay down lasting roots, and by the beginning of the more nationalist Ming dynasty, Christianity again all but vanished from China. It was not until the end of the Ming dynasty and the arrival of the Jesuit mission that Christianity would again make headway in Chinese society.

### 2.1. Background on the Jesuit Mission and Its Goals in East Asia

Founded in 1540—just twenty-three years after Martin Luther appended his *Ninety-Five Theses*—the Jesuits represented the tip of the spear in the Catholic Church’s response to the Protestant Reformation sweeping through Europe at the time. While today the Jesuits are known for the breadth of their activities, including education, research, humanitarian missions, and ecumenical dialogue, the overarching mission at the time of their formation was counter-reformation activities, which, as part of the Catholic Revival, included sending them to the farthest reaches of the known world to spread Catholic doctrines. Within the vast and well-documented history of Jesuit missions, few places have proved as interesting and challenging to Christian missions as China and Japan. The story starts with Francis Xavier—one of the founding members along with its central figure, Ignatius of Loyola—who met with a certain Japanese man named Anjirō while on his way to Goa. Xavier had received a written report from Jorge Álvares that was supplemented by an interview with the Japanese man that convinced him that Japan was an eminently promising prospect for evangelization. Excited by the possibility, upon arrival in Goa, Xavier had Anjirō instructed in the faith and later baptized by the Bishop of Goa, whereupon he was given the name Paul (Rule 2010, p. 8). He arrived in Kagoshima with Anjirō and a contingent of other Jesuits in 1549.<sup>2</sup>

Anjirō is an important early figure in the story of how the Jesuits learned about and approached the issue of the ultimate, or God, in China and Japan. In brief, Anjirō’s presen-

tation of religion in Japan placed much of Japanese religion in a Christian framework, leading some of his interlocutors to consider that certain Christian ideas had already reached Japan (App 2012, pp. 13–15).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this chance meeting between Xavier and Anjirō was the spark that set off the entire mission to China and Japan. The goal of the Jesuit mission, like any mission, was to gain believers and thereby save souls, so what seemed, although ultimately erroneously, to be a promising locale with a common (yet perhaps corrupted) religious framework posed as a welcome springboard for expanding the mission. And this is what happened, in effect. Early on, during Xavier’s stay in Japan, he was so impressed with the Japanese people and society as a whole that he predicted that the whole country would be Christian within two years. What happened, however, is that within roughly two years, he left Japan frustrated and headed toward China, which he had come to see as the source of cultural authority for Japan. He never made it to China but rather died en route, but the mission had now set its sights on China, where it would go on to have a significant and broad-ranging impact.

Ultimately, the Jesuit mission to both China and Japan failed to lay down enduring roots. There are several reasons for this, not least of which is the considerable linguistic barrier, but perhaps the most daunting of all was the religious discourse, which was oriented on a fundamentally different axis where two parallel lines of praxis and belief do not intersect in the same way on the matrix of religious experience. However, it was not only the religious cultures of the two countries that challenged the Jesuits, but rather political factors that resulted in the eventual expulsion of the missionaries. While passing reference is made to the political situation in China and Japan as it is inextricably linked with the overarching narrative, the focus of the investigation is on the fundamental differences in the religious worldviews—particularly regarding the Ultimate, which the Jesuits termed “Deus” and the Buddhists appeared to see as “emptiness”—and how the polemical strategies employed on both sides attempted to traverse the gulf in language, concept, belief, and practice.

## 2.2. Overview of Buddhism in China and Japan at the Time of the Missionaries’ Arrival

The types of Buddhism that the missionaries encountered in both China and Japan were mature traditions that had over a millennium of time to develop. In the case of China, it is believed that Buddhism started to make serious inroads right around the beginning of the Common Era, and even in Japan, it started to lay roots by the middle of the sixth century. From early in its history in both countries, Buddhism established a strong institutional basis that eventually worked in a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship with the temporal powers that saw their mutual flourishing as a means to ensure concomitant stability. This particularly became the case in Japan, where the political reaction to what came to be perceived as the Christian threat resulted in all households having to register at Buddhist temples to prove that they were not Christians. In the case of China, which already had developed systems of thought with its network of institutions at the time of Buddhism’s arrival, there was initial resistance to the Buddhist monastic model that ran contrary to the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and serving in society. By the time of the missionaries’ arrival, however, Buddhism had evolved to occupy a central and indelible place within the spiritual and institutional landscape, and its institutional and doctrinal cohesion posed the greatest challenge to the Jesuit endeavor in both China and Japan.

The Buddhism that came to flourish in East Asia belonged to the Mahāyana tradition, a form of Buddhism that arose approximately five hundred years after the death of the Buddha. It responded to the needs of a new period and included within it a vast corpus, cosmic in scale, that included magical elements (Hirakawa 1990, pp. 3–4). These magical elements and the worldly benefits they were seen as capable of securing remained one of its most attractive aspects to both adherents and ruling powers alike. Other doctrinal innovations of the Mahāyana that directly impacted the paradigm through which the Buddhists and Jesuits would both understand and misunderstand each other include the concept of a cosmic, non-dual Buddha, seen in Mahāvairocana (大日如来 Ch. *Dari rurai*; Jp. *Dainichi*

*nyorai*), and that of “emptiness” 空 (Ch. *kong*; Jp. *kū*) as expressed in the Perfection of Wisdom literature.<sup>4</sup> These two aspects will be explored in greater depth below, but suffice it to say that these non-dual teachings of Mahāyana Buddhism proved to be a difficult barrier to penetrate with the staunchly dualistic stance of Christian doctrine as understood by the Jesuits. This is not to say, of course, that non-duality, in its mystical expression of the intuition of unicity, is unknown in Christianity—quite the contrary. There is a long and rich tradition of non-duality within Christian mysticism, one well-known example being the 14th-century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which guides the contemplative to a “cloud of unknowing” in which the personal self is lost within the being of God.<sup>5</sup> As church history bears out, and as especially seen in the case of the 13th century Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart, any mystical experience that diverges from the Church doctrine is harshly suppressed, and as representatives of the Catholic Church on an official mission, the Jesuits did not have the established Christian mystical tradition to use as an interpretive lens in their interaction with Chinese and Japanese Buddhist representatives.

As with Catholic Christianity, Buddhism in East Asia also had its own established discourse on the nature of language, concept, belief, and practice. “Practice” 行 and “belief” 信 as two separate modes of religiosity that can be used in contradistinction to each other was not, and remains not, a fundamental characteristic of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> Language also proved to be an almost insurmountable barrier, as there was no native equivalent to the Judeo-Christian concept of God. Aspects such as eternality were able to be communicated, but a Creator God that is eternal but simultaneously has identifiable attributes (such as a personality) and also demands a personal relationship with mankind had no conceptual analogue, thereby taxing the limits of both language and thought. Nowhere is this more evident, or colorfully played out, than in the discourse about the Absolute, which at once, depending on the cultural viewpoint, could appear as nothing [emptiness] or everything.

### 2.3. Key Figures and Events Shaping the Jesuit–Buddhist Encounter

The Jesuit–Buddhist encounter in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century East Asia represents a momentous event in religious history that included a large number of personalities on both sides. As to who represents the most central figures, it will depend on the political or religious realms being discussed, and even these two categories are not anywhere near exhaustive in the breadth and depth of this cultural meeting. As seen above, Xavier’s fateful meeting with the Japanese pirate Anjirō served as the impetus for Xavier to make a trip to Japan, which, when he set foot in Kagoshima in 1549, represented the first foray of Church-sanctioned Catholic Christianity in East Asia. After two equally fruitful and fitful years in Japan, he attempted to move to China, and although he died before he could arrive and leave a lasting legacy, he set in motion the events that signaled an expansion of the Jesuit mission from Japan to China. If forced to posit three figures who played a particularly outsized role in translating Christianity to the Buddhists and Buddhism to the Christians, one could reasonably look to Matteo Ricci, Alessandro Valignano, and Fukansai Habian and their representative works, which are unparalleled in their clear doctrinal agenda and depth of presentation. There are many more important actors and crucial events than can be recounted here, but an examination of these three and their activities in China and Japan will provide central insights into how the discourse about God/the Ultimate was preached and polemicized during the crucial period of translation and discourse formation.<sup>7</sup>

Among the most important events during the early stages of this encounter, Francis Xavier’s meeting with Anjirō directly led to the Jesuit mission setting its sights on Japan, which served as the gateway to China. His positive early impressions of the Japanese notwithstanding, it became clear before too long that a lack of terminological and doctrinal common ground was going to prove a monumental challenge. This problem came to a head in one of the earliest debates between the missionaries and the Japanese Buddhists, the *Yamaguchi Tōron* 山口討論 (Yamaguchi Debate), which took place in 1551. The debate was attended by Cosme de Torres (1510–1570), Xavier’s replacement in Yamaguchi, and his translator, Juan Fernández (1526–1567), representing Catholic Christianity. This early



and crucial Buddhist–Christian exchange discussed such perennial topics as the nature of God, the nature of humanity, reason, the soul, the Creator, salvation, the afterlife, and nothingness.<sup>8</sup> The Yamaguchi Debate was an early watershed, and although important developments continued to occur, the arrival of Alessandro Valignano and his activities in Japan and Valignano’s one-time student, Matteo Ricci’s activities in China, can be considered the next “golden era” of Jesuit activity in East Asia. Both of their efforts met with varying degrees of success, but what cannot be denied is their central and lasting impact not only in the history of Buddhist–Christian exchange but in East–West cultural history as well.

In Valignano’s rather extensive writings and records, his mission methodology of accommodation can be seen, as well as his detailed and precise reaction against Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, the schools he considered to be the biggest challenges to a successful mission. In *Nihon no katekizumo*, he lays out his understanding and response to these two Buddhist traditions in detail. Matteo Ricci took a different approach in China, becoming a Chinese-style literatus in his own right, producing texts in Chinese, and leveling a profound impact on the Chinese sciences, religious, and cultural history. Ricci’s *Tianzhu shiyi* took an interesting tack by arguing the Christian God had already arrived in China in the form of the pristine Confucianism of antiquity. By locating a common “truth”, he was able to capitalize on the long-standing, even if at times inert, tension between Confucianism and the other two great Chinese thought systems of Buddhism and Daoism. Christianity was true Confucianism, so the Chinese should naturally embrace the Jesuit teaching, as Ricci argued.

Finally, Valignano’s protégé, Fukansai Habian, a former Zen monk turned zealous Jesuit missionary, represented a new kind of figure in the story of the Jesuit mission to East Asia. At once nuanced and sophisticated in his understanding of the Japanese intellectual/spiritual systems of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, he was also competent in Jesuit methods and theology, having gone through the rigorous Jesuit educational system. Habian’s work, *Myōtei Mondō*, can be considered one of the polemical high points of the Jesuit–Buddhist interaction in East Asia in its depth of informed, critical presentation of native thought systems from the perspective of a Japanese Christian. This paper will look at some of the polemical highlights of this discourse, focusing on how the Ultimate—termed “Deus/God” by the Jesuits and “Emptiness/Nothingness” by the Buddhists—was taught, translated, and received by both sides, and how certain misunderstandings became codified into the discourse that went on to influence generations of Europeans in their understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist Asia.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Understanding God in the Jesuit Mission

As this investigation is focused on how the Jesuits presented the Christian concept of Deus/God during the East Asian mission, it will not touch upon the vast corpus of Church and Scholastic writings that define orthodoxy regarding this, but rather look only at the content of those works mentioned above that were written by Jesuits for their Japanese and Chinese readers. This highlights the polemical techniques employed by the Jesuits to communicate understanding of the Christian God to a culture without a common cultural, linguistic, or religious basis. Since the three works under investigation were all written within twenty years of each other and since each author has a distinct approach, rather than discussing them in chronological and thematic order, this paper will look at Ricci in the case of China and then back to Japan, where the Jesuit mission to East Asia first started.

First, some more attention to the texts’ historical contextualization, a consideration of the texts’ target readership, and the way in which they differ might help to situate them within the narrative. Ricci’s text is not a catechism in the strict sense of the term, as it does not focus on a clear exposition of Christian doctrine for instruction, but within a refutation of Buddhism and Daoism, it nonetheless presents basic teachings such as the ontological paradigm of the Christian Deity, which is contrasted with the nihilism of Buddho-Daoist practice and belief. It was Valignano who urged Ricci to produce a primer of Christian first

principles for intellectuals, for which he set about a study and translation project of the Chinese classics, which would also provide him with the cultural sensitivity to more effectively present Christian doctrine. In consideration of the sophistication of the arguments and Ricci's own milieu, it can be reasonably concluded that *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* was primarily intended for the intellectual class, which included non-Christians or recent converts. *Nihon no Katekizumo*, the translation of a Latin text prepared by Valignano with the help of a native convert in Japan, did not most likely have as wide an intended readership as Ricci or Habian's text, but it nonetheless contained didactic value that made it suitable to be used in the Jesuit curriculum for Japanese converts or for any literate Japanese that needed a primer of Christian doctrine. Its strong emphasis on the afterlife and Japanese Buddhism's inability to attain it are marked characteristics that distinguish it from the other two texts under investigation. *Myōtei Mondō* is the only text of the three that was written by a native convert. As a former Buddhist monk turned Christian convert, Habian represented a powerful polemical ally who proved his usefulness by becoming something of a ringer in debates with Buddhists. *Myōtei Mondō*'s agenda very much reflects this role of Habian, as the work makes a systematized refutation of Japanese schools of thought from an insider's perspective. It differs from the other two texts above in that it makes a point to present the entirety of native systems—including the various schools of Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism—before turning its attention to Christianity and why it is the sole means to salvation. The exhaustiveness of his refutation—more slash and burn than strategic cultivation—demonstrates that, in his view, the ground first had to be cleared before the seeds of a Christianization of Japan could commence.

Matteo Ricci truly achieved a rare accomplishment by becoming a respected figure in the Chinese intellectual milieu of his day. The mission in Japan impressed upon the Jesuits the high status and importance of Buddhism, so Ricci shaved his head and put on the robes of a Buddhist early in his mission with the idea that it would help them gain recognition by the elites. It had the opposite effect; however, as compared to Japan, the Buddhists in China had much less prestige, and donning the appearance of a poor monk would not help the mission to make inroads among the arbiters of high culture. Confucian scholars looked upon Buddhism as heterodox, even after a millennia and a half on Chinese soil. Instead, he was informed that he would do well to adopt the guise of a Mandarin, that is, an educated Confucian literatus, which is precisely what he set out to do, both in outer aspect and intellectual accomplishment. This change in approach took place around 1591 (Ricci 1985, p. 13). Valignano, Ricci's erstwhile teacher, succeeded Xavier as head of the mission, and his approach was one marked by measured accommodation of the local culture, in the belief that this methodology represented the most efficacious way to mission success. After Valignano's arrival in Macao in 1578, it was not long before he realized that the key to success could only be cut by means of a mastery of the Chinese language. This task was assigned to Ricci, who proved himself an adept student (Ricci 1985, pp. 4–5).<sup>10</sup>

Ricci also immersed himself in Chinese intellectual heritage, eventually going on to translate the Four Books (Doctrine of the Mean, the Great Learning, Mencius, and the Analects) and the Six Classics (The Book of Changes, The Book of History, The Book of Songs, The Book of Rites, The Book of Music, and the Spring and Autumn Annals). These activities were to provide him with an adequate foundation of Chinese thought and religion in order to seek out common ground. And as is often the case with a clear agenda that starts with an *a priori* conclusion, he was able to find what he sought, writing to Father General Aquavia, "I have noted down many terms and phrases in harmony with our faith, for instance, 'the unity of God', 'the immortality of the soul', 'the glory of the blessed', and the like". (Ricci 1985, p. 20). And this indeed represented the agenda of Ricci, which was to find common ground within the basis of Chinese thought on which he could build a Christian edifice that Chinese could identify with and feel comfortable adopting if it could be shown that the original teachings of the Confucian tradition were not only congruent with Christianity but were the same. Ricci could achieve two polemical goals at the same time by asserting that it was only through the nihilistic and heterodox teachings of Buddhism

and Daoism that this pristine, true form of Confucianism—which was none other than Christianity—became corrupted and estranged from its original, essential nature. This is the polemical device that Ricci employed, in effect asserting that true Confucianism was Christianity and that a “return” to Christianity was the most logical, and in fact Chinese, thing one could do. Below, some of Ricci’s polemical strategies are examined as they are found in his text, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*.

*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* takes a dialogue format between a member of the Chinese intelligentsia and a missionary. The “question and answer” (Ch. *wenda*; Jp. *mondō* 問答) format has ample precedent across both East and West, seen in both the Socratic dialogues as well as Confucius’ *Analects* 論語. Within the context of a missionary endeavor, the dialogue format makes a particularly effective medium as it allows the author to stand aloof from the text while inserting his or her views and agenda into the discussion, allowing for greater impunity than would be the case in a first-person narrative (Baskind and Bowring 2016, p. 9). The investigation of this work focuses on the first part, within which Ricci establishes the proofs for the existence of God, and also sets out to appeal to the ancient Confucianism prior to the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) to criticize the Daoist and Buddhist concepts of *wu* 無 (“nothingness”, “non-being”) and *kong* 空 (“emptiness”), respectively (Ricci 1985, p. 23). It included the polemical tack he employed to argue for the existence of the Christian God, which required the construction of a common ancestor, or more precisely, an original ancestor, so to speak, seen in “God” for the Christians and “heaven” 天 (Ch. *tian*) for the ultimate in pristine Confucianism to encourage the Chinese to return to their origins, and better yet, to do so in the newest and truest iteration of their original spirituality, now called “Christianity”. This is an effective, even if contrived, polemical strategy that is made to give the impression that there is no need for the trauma of breaking with tradition. To this is added the foil of Buddhism and Daoism, which, presented as nihilistic and world-denying, work to further highlight the similarities between Christianity and Confucianism while simultaneously refuting Buddhism and Daoism.

Before examining the theological strategy that Ricci employed in marshalling native Chinese systems of thought into his polemical discourse, one should first look at how he defines the Christian God, termed the “Lord” (Ch. *zhu* 主) of “Heaven” (*tian* 天). The passages below from Ricci’s *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* run to considerable length, but they are necessary and effective as primary textual support for directly detailing how the mission to East Asia was underpinned by deliberate and meticulous theological and polemical strategies.

58. If we now wish to say what the Lord of Heaven is we can only say He is not heaven and not earth; His loftiness and intelligence are much more extensive and much more ample than that of heaven and earth. He is not a ghost or a spirit; His spiritual essence transcends all ghosts and spirits. He is not man; He is the source of morality.

59. He has no past or future. Should I wish to speak of His past, I can only do so by saying that He lacks any beginning, and should I wish to speak of His future, I can only do so by saying that He lacks any end.

60. If I wish to infer the nature of His essence, I find that no place can contain Him and yet there is no place where He is not present; that He is unmoving and yet that He is the active cause of all movement; that He has no hands or mouth, and yet that He creates all things and instructs all people. (Ricci 1985, p. 95)

Ricci presents the Christian God primarily through the *via negativa*, that is, by explaining what he is not. The way Ricci describes it, the Christian God is “not heaven” and “not earth”, neither man nor spirit; he is unpossessed of a past or future, beginning or end, and also that while no place can contain him, there is no place that he is not. He is, in effect, the active cause of everything. It is known that scholastic luminaries like Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) posited—adopting Aristotle’s theory—the existence of a primary unmoved mover, which at times sounds very apophatic in its orientation. To this unmoved mover,

however, the scholastics and orthodox Catholic doctrine also apply the positive/cataphatic attributes of the deity that are found in the Christian scriptures. This theological overlay developed over centuries within a common cultural framework that allowed for the gradual melding of disparate philosophical and theological worldviews. The Chinese, existing in a completely different cultural and spiritual milieu, underwent no such process, thus making the idiosyncratic doctrinal postulates much more difficult to introduce into a new framework. One can imagine that this is why Ricci starts out with a bare-bones introduction, stating what the deity is not, following along—most likely unawares—of the similar apophatic approach found throughout Buddhist texts and which is most clearly encapsulated in the most widely known East Asian Buddhist text, the *Heart Sutra* (Skt. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*; Ch. *Bore boluomiduo xinjing*; Jp. *Hannya haramitta shingyō*).<sup>11</sup> Ricci's presentation of Christianity in the passage above avoids central doctrinal assertions as they are found in the bastion of orthodoxy, the Nicene Creed. There is no mention of the Trinity, and in fact, in the above passage, Ricci would seem to contradict this central doctrine by asserting, "He is not a ghost or a spirit...He is not a man", a statement that seems to contradict the second and third persons in the Trinity. As an early and definitive introduction to the nature of the deity in his work, Ricci is clearly presenting it in as simple and unadorned a manner as possible, and in a fashion that would resonate more than not with his Chinese audience.

When Ricci turns to Buddhism and Daoism, however, he sets up a straw man as he has the Chinese scholar inquire about the relative truth of China's three great spiritual/intellectual traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

66. In our China there are three religions, each with its own teaching. Lao Tzu said: Things are produced from nothing", and made "nothing" the Way [of Life]. The Buddha taught that "the visible world emerges from voidness", and made "voidness" the end [of all effort]. The Confucians say: "In the processes of Yi there exists the Supreme Ultimate" and therefore make "existence" the basic principle [of all things] and "sincerity" the subject of the study of self-cultivation. I wonder who, in your revered view, is correct? (Ricci 1985, p. 97)

In this passage, Ricci, in the guise of the Chinese scholar presenting Chinese systems of thought, is able to set up his straw man by having the text's polemical mouthpiece and foil in the form of the Chinese scholar present Buddhism and Daoism as his discourse requires—as based on emptiness, nothingness, and voidness (Ch. *kong* 空; *wu* 無; *xu* 虛).<sup>12</sup> Confucianism fares better as it will later need to function as the original common ancestor of the Christian God, so here Ricci only points out one aspect of Neo-Confucianism with which he takes issue—the Supreme Ultimate.<sup>13</sup>

Ricci continues his attack on voidness and emptiness as principles on which to base a religion. He preempts a potential question of void or emptiness in a Judeo-Christian worldview by asking indirectly about the issue of creation ex nihilo, which would seem to posit an original and necessary void from which creation sprang by the fiat of the deity. Ricci tweaks this concept by having the Chinese scholar present "voidness" and "nothingness" not as the backdrop on which a Creator Deity imposed creation but as the agent-source itself of all things, in effect presenting "voidness" and "nothingness" as the absentee source of all things, while itself remaining void and nothing.

71. *The Chinese scholar says:* There is only one orthodox doctrine; how can there be many? Nevertheless, the teachings of Buddhism and Taoism are not without some foundation. All things, they say, are first void and then later actualized; at first they do not exist, and it is only later that they come into existence. Thus, they seem to regard "voidness" and "nothingness" as the sources of things.

72. *The Western scholars says...*What is now called "voidness" or "nothingness" possesses absolutely nothing of its own. How then can it give nature and form to something else and thereby cause it to come into being? A thing must genuinely exist before it can be said to exist. What does not genuinely exist does



not exist. If the source of all things were not real or did not exist then the things produced by it would naturally also not exist...How can things which are essentially nothing or void employ their voidness and nothingness to cause all things to come into being and to continue in existence? If we look at things in terms of their causes, we must conclude that since these causes are called “voidness” and “nothingness” they cannot be the active, formal, material and final causes of things; and since this is so of what use are they to things? (Ricci 1985, p. 103)

Above, Ricci makes a clear distinction between “something” (Ch. *you* 有) and its seeming opposite, “nothing” (Ch. *wu* 無), which he takes as the defining difference. While “voidness” and “nothingness” can be the backdrop, the canvas, if you will, upon which a Creator Deity produces all things, the backdrop or canvas cannot produce variety; it can only *be* what it is, which is a completely passive state. Ricci negates creation ex nihilo in regards to everything but the Deity. He asserts that “a thing must genuinely exist before it can be said to exist”, implying that because the Deity exists, an infinite variety can be created by him, and as all is an emanation of him, this is to imply that he alone exists. This leads back to a non-dual understanding of the ultimate, a perspective that would resonate with Buddhists and Daoists and any mystical, non-dual spirituality that is found throughout traditions.

After thoroughly establishing Buddhism and Daoism as based on voidness and nothingness and thus the untenability of these as sources of creation and as a valid spiritual foundation, Ricci locates Christianity’s common Chinese ancestor in the original, pristine form of Confucianism. The Chinese have always highly valued antiquity. Confucius himself always looked back to the Western Zhou Dynasty 西周 (1046 BCE–771 BCE)—epitomized in the example of the Duke of Zhou—as a high point of Chinese culture, and often the further back one goes, the greater and more revered the semi-mythical emperors and figures become. This would not have been lost on Ricci, and he finds the Sovereign on High, the ruler of heaven and earth, back in ancient times.

78. *The Western scholar says:* Although I arrived in China late in life, I have assiduously studied the ancient records of China and discovered that the superior men of ancient times worshipped and revered the Sovereign on High, [the Supreme Lord] of Heaven and earth, but I have never heard of them paying respects to the Supreme Ultimate. If the Supreme Ultimate is the Sovereign on High and ancestor of all things, why did not the sages of ancient times say so? (Ricci 1985, p. 107)

Another important point of doctrine on which the missionaries and Ricci placed emphasis was the ontological difference between God and man. This may seem to contradict the earlier passage that argued that God is in all things and is the active agent of all, but to present God in a panentheistic manner as penetrating and inclusive in all is to make man and the active agent of God as one and not separate. Such an understanding would seem to obviate the role of the Church as an intermediary between God and man and thus needed to be squashed in the interests of maintaining authority. For Christian doctrine to function with its administering organ, the Church, it required an unbridgeable gulf between man and God. The concept of ultimate unity runs directly counter to this. Below, the Chinese scholar asks about the “organic” unity of all things in the world.

238. *The Chinese scholar says:*...But there are some people who say that man is an organic unity with all things in the world. What do you say to that? (Ricci 1985, p. 225)

245. *The Western scholar says:* The Confucians of former times made use of the assertion that all things are organically one to encourage the common people to put their sense of humanity into operation. What they meant when they used the expression “organically one” was simply that things emerge from one source. But, if you believe that all things really are organically one, then this will result in the destruction of the great Way of humanity and righteousness. And why should

this be so? Because for humanity and righteousness to operate there must be at least two persons. If all things are really regarded as organically one then that is to treat all things as if they were really one thing, and to say that the differences between them are mere empty images. If they are only empty images, how can there be mutual love and respect? Therefore, it is said that he who treads the path of humanity extends it from himself to others. (Ricci 1985, p. 229)

Ricci, in the guise of the Western scholar, posits that “organically one” really means all things emanating from a single source, and that to really believe all things are organically one is to destroy any basis for morality (“humanity and righteousness”) as there must be discrete individuals for humanity/morality to function. To believe otherwise is to see others as mere “empty images”, which cannot give rise to mutual love and respect. The idea of “empty images” is an extension of the “voidness”, “nothingness”, and “emptiness” that Ricci and the other missionaries railed against. The aforementioned *Heart Sutra* and all prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) literature emphasize ad infinitum that things are “empty” of a self-nature and any permanent essence—a discourse that directly contradicts the concept of “soul”, the sine qua non for Christian soteriological and eschatological discourse. Without an eternal soul that experiences the joys of heaven or suffers the torments of hell, Christian discourse loses its theological immediacy. Near the end of Ricci’s treatise, he reiterates the stark, unbridgeable gulf between Buddhism and Daoism’s emptiness and non-existence, in contrast to Christianity’s foundation in fullness and existence.

514. Further, in the teachings of the Three Religions, Taoism emphasizes “nothing”, Buddhism “voidness”, and Confucianism “sincerity” and “being”. In the world of opposites there are no greater distinctions than those between emptiness and fullness and between existence and non-existence. If existence and non-existence, emptiness and fullness can be harmonized, then fire and water, squareness and roundness, east and west, and heaven and earth can all be harmonized, and there will be nothing in the world which will not be possible. (Ricci 1985, p. 405)

While Ricci’s text makes a wide survey of Chinese schools of thought and focuses in on certain aspects of Christian doctrine, he closes his text with a return to the overriding polemical exigency of the entire Jesuit mission—the translation and transmission of the Christian concept of God, which first necessitates demonstrating the utter impotency of Chinese spiritual systems. And the clearest and most stark exposition of this difference is to establish Christianity as based on “something” and Buddhism and Daoism as based on “nothing”. This represents the unbridgeable doctrinal gulf that Ricci and the Jesuits had to communicate to the Chinese and Japanese in order to establish a new playing field with its new rules. The goal of life could not be to merely return to a nothingness or voidness that was banished by the act of creation, but rather to acknowledge the True Lord of Heaven, who was both the creator himself and just also happened to have everyone’s post-mortem fate in his hands. Ricci’s polemical strategy was to entice the Chinese into the Christian fold by recognizing that their original, ancient way of true, pristine Confucianism was none other than Christianity, but that it became corrupted over the centuries by accretions from Buddhism and Daoism, evident in the Neo-Confucianism that was dominant during Ricci’s time in China. All they had to do was return to their roots, which Ricci would facilitate by introducing them to the most complete iteration of that way. That is to say, even if Confucianism itself could no longer serve as the vessel for its original teachings, Christianity can, as it preserves the true teaching of the Lord of Heaven, formerly known as “Confucianism”.

Ricci attained a level of cultural literacy and accomplishment that few other Jesuits in the East Asian mission were able to approach. This afforded him the intellectual tools to comb through Chinese tradition and present a nuanced argument for the Chinese to adopt Christianity. In a sense, it can be thought of as conversion by proxy, as Confucianism was to serve as the vehicle for moving to Christianity. To recast Chinese tradition in the studied

manner that Ricci attempted was not an option for the rest of the Jesuit mission and others, as will be seen in Valignano's *Japanese Catechism* below, which simply attacked Buddhism head-on while contrasting it with Christian theological claims. This polemical tack largely remained the same with Valignano: Christianity offered something, namely, Deus, which would directly lead to a blessed post-mortem eventuality (heaven), while Buddhism—the central challenge for the Jesuits in Japan—which was based in nothingness and emptiness, post-mortem offered only more of the same—nothing. This episode is explored in greater depth below.

### 3.1. *An Afterlife of Nothing and Void: Alessandro Valignano and Japanese Catechism*

Alessandro Valignano, unlike Francis Xavier, started his East Asian mission in China. His activities in China are an interesting and important story in their own right, but as he was particularly focused on Japan, and since it is where he spent much of his time and wrote the text under consideration, the investigation will be limited to this phase of his mission.

Valignano was one of the central figures in the Jesuit mission in Japan, known for his stance on cultural accommodation as part of his mission strategy. As he never mastered the language himself, trustworthy native informants were crucial to his success. *Japanese Catechism* (日本のカテキズモ; 1586) is an example of this, as it was written by Valignano with the help of a former Buddhist monk who converted to Christianity. This work stands out for its detailed discussion and refutation of Japanese Buddhism while simultaneously explaining Christian doctrine and views of the afterlife, the latter being one of the main points espoused in the text. The work itself was originally published in Latin in Lisbon in 1586 as *Catechismus Christianae Fidei*. Some have looked to this text as having a significant influence on other missionaries and European intellectuals, thereby playing an important role in the construction of “Oriental Philosophy”.<sup>14</sup> Contemporaneously, Valignano's polemical agenda, similar to Ricci's, was to demonstrate that Buddhist religious goals are based on void and nothingness and thus lead to void and nothingness post-mortem. This doctrinal position was fleshed out during the Yamaguchi Debate when Cosme de Torres asked a Zen monk about how one becomes a saint in Buddhism, to which the monk replied, “There are no saints. There is absolutely no need to try to become one. That is to say, all existence comes from nothingness (*mu*) and returns to nothingness” (Schurhammer 1964, p. 129). This exchange represents the first instance in missionary writings in Japan that applies the concept of nothingness to Buddhist religious goals (Kishino 1998, p. 225). What Valignano and the Jesuit mission needed was a strong incentive to reject what they perceived as this worldview based on “nothingness”. As the Zen monk stated, if one issues from nothingness and returns to nothingness, one is returning to the original state, not something that necessarily strikes fear in the heart of those weaned in such an intellectual and spiritual milieu. The tack that Valignano employed was to establish the reality of the Christian afterlife with its more incentivized and stark two-tier paradigm. To this end, Valignano writes in *Japanese Catechism*:

The soul of man is a spiritual medium or form that imparts sense perceptions, life, and mobility to the flesh. It is higher and superior to the other forms of nature. Also, since it is made of spirit, it does not die, but lives forever in the other world. Nevertheless, since all things created by Deus were created from nothing, all created things are infinitely inferior in nature and essence to the creating Source [Deus]. In addition, just as all created things are under the control of Deus, so is the soul of man also subject to his authority. Among these three points that we are now discussing, we have refuted the Japanese schools' teachings regarding the second (about the imperishability of the soul), and here I intend to show that this imperishable soul of man does not in any way die. They say that when a man dies he disappears into the universe, does not move on to a life in the other world, and does not receive any punishments or rewards. This view is completely mistaken. Man's soul is immortal, and the spirit that leaves the body does not dis-

appear, but rather when the body dies it moves to the next world, where from what we call Deus, the source from which all things were created people receive all the rewards or retribution coming to them, and in accordance with the good and evil actions from this life either join the saintly ones in heaven for an eternity of pleasure, or becomes a prisoner of the dark dungeon of hell where they receive an eternity of punishments. This is what we have demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt. (Valignano 1969, p. 6)<sup>15</sup>

Throughout *Japanese Catechism*, there is a marked emphasis on the afterlife, a topic that receives comparatively little attention in Ricci's text. In the above passage, Valignano establishes the reality of the Christian vision of the afterlife, to which he assigns the absolute control and authority of Deus, putting a deliberate emphasis on Deus's role as the arbiter of the post-mortem fate. Establishing this afterlife paradigm requires, by its very definition, a refutation of the stated Buddhist view that one disappears into nothingness. There is a clear reason for the visceral Jesuit reaction to the idea of "nothingness" or "voidness" after death, which is that it is paradigm-destroying in its obviation of the soul in the Christian understanding. Without an immortal soul—which is none other than a disembodied consciousness and self-awareness—the whole Christian afterlife scenario, both its immediacy and rationale, dissolves. As has been stated elsewhere, in the missionary worldview, "nothingness" does not, in fact, cannot exist, as it was banished from creation by the act of creation, which means that, in other words, "nonexistence" does not exist (Baskind 2018, p. 246). Once the "truth" of the immortal soul and reality of the afterlife are posited, Valignano makes clear, unequivocal, and stark incentivization the next order of business. To this end, he mentions the eternity of pleasure to be experienced by the faithful Christian who accepts Christianity's truth claims, which is contrasted with the eternity of punishments in the "dark dungeon of hell", a choice that is structurally intentioned to leave little doubt as to the more desired eventuality. Without such a two-tiered system that renders non-compliance an absurd conclusion, the most pressingly persuasive argument for conversion is rendered moot.

So as to leave no doubt about the untenability of the Japanese conception of the afterlife, Valignano continues to further this argument by emphasizing the centrality of Deus in both this world and in the afterlife. By further emphasizing the uniqueness and importance of Deus as an omnipotent Supreme Being with dominion in this life and the next—the linchpin of Christian discourse and the central omission in Buddhism and Japanese religion as a whole—the circuit of the polemical loop is closed, and the discourse becomes a movement from the Cause [Deus] to the bifurcated effects (desirable and undesirable), leaving a single logical choice, as seen below.

We have logically demonstrated that the Japanese [Buddhist] schools are ineffectual when it comes to matters of salvation. We have also arrived at the [logical] conclusion that Deus, the true source of everything is one. Deus is the creator of the world, the sustainer, the ruler, and the master. Also, we have concluded that the human soul is immortal and has life in the next world, and that's where the good get their rewards and the evil ones their punishments. In other words, all the actions one commits are recorded and people receive their just rewards, and based on their good or evil actions receive an eternity of honor or of punishment...The practices and teachings of Christianity are bequeathed by the highest good, Deus, so by investigating these teachings one is led to salvation in an eternity of bliss, and thus the importance of a correct and proper lifestyle...First of all, all the teachings regarding salvation originate with Deus and represent the correct way of living. Therefore, man can only find salvation in the correct contemplation, prayer, teaching, and ethics as instructed by Deus. That means, namely, that only Deus can grant eternal salvation to people. (Valignano 1969, p. 84)



Furthermore, to drive home the point that the Japanese Buddhist view of the afterlife is mistaken, Valignano makes a refutation of the Pure Land doctrines of the afterlife as unrealistic and ungrounded, all on the way to establishing the absolute reliance on Deus as the founding and mediating agent for ontological as well as eschatological claims.

It is a matter of daily experience that peace cannot be found through the human will, and the intellect cannot be satisfied. The reason is because people, through all the kinds of sensual desires, no matter how sweet, no matter how wealthy or successful [one may be], even if one partakes of the finest foods and beverages, it is impossible to be fully satisfied, and the one always demands more and better. Therefore it is impossible to find happiness in the next life by enjoying the pleasures of bodily sensations such as being among lush fruiting trees, flowers, and grasses, or through the sounds of flutes and wafting music. This simply cannot satisfy the spirit...[and] when a person dies all of his senses, the functions of the flesh, and abilities perish as well...Therefore, he cannot hear, cannot see, cannot taste, cannot smell, and cannot touch anything. However, after death, three abilities of the spirit persist; they are, memory, intellect, and will only. It is said that because of these abilities humans possess reason, and because these are not tied to any part of the body, their functioning does not require the help or agency of the body...Thus, the [Buddhist] monks that teach that bliss in the afterlife includes singing, flutes, zithers, and the like, namely, is none other than sensual enjoyment, are utterly silly and illogical. (Valignano 1969, pp. 67, 79–80)

In the Buddhist worldview, the Six Realms of heaven—humans, titans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell—are not eternal, and one falls into/out of each in accordance with the conditions of one's actions (karma). This paradigm does not obviate the urgency of coming into the orthodox teachings, as this is a natural process that occurs over numerous lifetimes, and the operative idea is that one is advancing on the path. Enlightenment, or birth in the Pure Land (a non-backsliding realm), removes one from this cycle, but chances to tread the correct path always exist, and one can always look to successive lifetimes. No such option exists in the Christian worldview, however. This theological urgency has been held up as the motive force behind the non-compromising immediacy of the missionary endeavor; if souls are going to be saved, it must be in this life—the only one there is before the eternal afterlife. But one cannot worship an afterlife, which, although it may be a goal, ultimately is only an epiphenomenon of a correct understanding and relationship with Deus, the importance of which cannot be overstated. This polemical strategy of Valignano's, rather than relate similarities of Christian discourse to native manifestations, chooses to highlight unbridgeable differences that must be traversed by a leap of faith—the only method of attainment. Although Valignano is known in part for his approach to accommodation, it did not extend to his presentation of Christian doctrine. There is no shortage of passages in *Japanese Catechism* that emphasize the correct understanding of Deus as both a prerequisite and a key to attaining the afterlife. Below, a clear, concise passage lays out this dynamic in no uncertain terms.

Deus is the source of all good and is possessed of an inconceivable and limitless capacity. He is the dispenser of all good. Apart from Deus there is no hope for attainment of the blessed and holy afterlife. Therefore, if one does not incline their heart to this wellspring of goodness one cannot be filled with true goodness and blessedness. Deus's unchanging and imperishable essence imparts a soul to mankind, and if one isn't taken in by a vain desire for wealth and glittering objects then they can receive the perfect blessedness that results. (Valignano 1969, p. 181)

Certainly, Valignano represents one of the most important figures in the Jesuit mission to East Asia. This is not only by virtue of the texts he authored, but in his broad-ranging activities in both China and Japan regarding the establishment of educational institutions and the method of missionary outreach, not to mention as the one-time teacher of Matteo Ricci, he left an indelible legacy in the initial cultural encounter between East and West

at the beginning of the early modern period. Nevertheless, unlike Ricci, Valignano never mastered either Chinese or Japanese and relied on native informants. His less nuanced approach to presenting Christian doctrine against an East Asian cultural backdrop is evidence of this. Ultimately, the most potent—and pointed—Japanese polemic against East Asian systems of thought would have to wait for Fukansai Habian, one of the most unique and challenging figures not only in the Jesuit mission to East Asia but in Japanese intellectual history as a whole. The following section will examine his discourse and polemic on Christian theological claims against Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism.

### 3.2. *Nothingness as God in Absentia: The Polemic of Japanese Christian Convert [and Eventual Apostate] Fukansai Habian*

Undoubtedly, one of the most interesting and conflicting figures in the history of Japanese Christianity is Fukansai Habian.<sup>16</sup> There is not much about his early life that can be said with any certainty, but based on his knowledge of koan manuals as revealed in his work, *Myōtei Mondō*, it is reasonable to assume that he spent time as a Zen monk in Daitokuji.<sup>17</sup> In 1583, at the age of eighteen, he converted to Christianity along with his mother and entered the Takatsuki *seminario*, where he received a broad Jesuit education. In 1586, he became a novice or “brother” (*irmao*), moving to the *collegio* in Amakusa and later to Nagasaki, where he became an instructor of Japanese in 1592. Among the projects he was involved in are a Japanese translation of *Aesop’s Fables* and the production of the *Amakusa-ban Heike monogatari* 天草版平家物語, a work that serves as a selection of certain parts intended to demonstrate key characteristics of Japanese culture. His masterwork, however, remains *Myōtei Mondō*.<sup>18</sup>

With his background as a Zen monk and solid Jesuit education, Habian quickly distinguished himself as an effective debater and champion of the Jesuit mission against its main polemical adversaries in the Japanese Buddhist establishment. In 1605, when Habian was forty years old, he produced the polemical tract *Myōtei Mondō*, which represented the first of its kind not only in Japan but in East Asia as a whole. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it was written by a native convert who was not only conversant in his native traditions but who also went through the Jesuit educational system and wrote a refutation of native systems of thought in a systematic and critical manner. It also provides a rare glimpse into how an educated Japanese man understood his own thought systems at the time.

As seen above, both Ricci and Valignano inveighed against Buddhism for its basis in nothingness and emptiness, insisting that a religion that posits no supreme being as sole creator and dispenser of justice necessarily cannot provide for a viable afterlife. Valignano displayed an incomplete understanding of Buddhism, but his text was more focused on presenting the Christian deity and its contingent afterlife than systematically refuting Buddhism. Indeed, Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife are held up as a foil to bolster Christian theological claims, but they are treated to a nearly equal measure of unreality based on their physical descriptions, as well as the nothingness and emptiness that are at the very foundation of Buddhism. Ricci, on the other hand, armed with a better understanding of Buddhism (and Daoism), did argue that their basis in nothingness, voidness, and emptiness rendered them both philosophically and ontologically untenable as they denied the Creator Deity and therefore any claim to the afterlife, but the insistence on this voidness or emptiness is not the overriding polemical focus. Rather, Ricci attempts to align fundamental concepts such as principle 理 (Ch. *li*) and nature 性 (Ch. *xing*) in support of the existence of the True Lord of Heaven. Mention of the afterlife does appear, but unlike Valignano, it is not the central crux of his polemical strategy. Rather, his efforts are aimed at demonstrating a correspondence between original Confucianism and Christianity in the hopes of attracting more Chinese to the new religion. Yet Habian, the erstwhile Zen monk who would have known the Mahayana Buddhist teaching that “true emptiness is wondrous existence” *shinkū myōu* 真空妙有, presented the whole of Japanese religion, and in particular Buddhism and its varied schools, as nothing more than different ways

of expressing the same fundamental nothingness and emptiness. How he constructed this polemic is explored below.

Toward the end of a long and detailed exposition on the various Buddhist schools in Japan, throughout which the fundamental emptiness and ineffectuality are constantly emphasized, Habian comes to a preliminary conclusion regarding the whole of Buddhism that runs as below:

In Buddhism the essential thing, regardless of the school, is to clarify even just one mind. They say this one mind is one's true nature; this one mind is the Buddha; this one mind is Hell; this one mind is Heaven. When it comes down to it, to say "one mind is nothingness" is to say that everything comes to an end. This is what is meant by the phrase "With mind one sinks for countless kalpas. With no-mind one attains true awakening in an instant...In Buddhism, one who does not settle for non-existence is somebody who knows neither Buddha nor Dharma. But once one understands non-existence, everything becomes the same, so one becomes entirely passive. If someone says the afterlife exists, they say "yes, yes" it exists; and if someone says it does not exist, they say "indeed, what is there to leave behind?" Believing the ultimate in Zen is to become like a strand of willow wafting here and there depending on the wind. You only really grasp the truth—"the importance of a mere brush of the sleeve"—once you have understood essential nothingness. In any case, whether it be 'Zen' or 'doctrine' it's all just doctrine in the end. Pointless, isn't it, the way Buddhism always comes down to non-existence like this? (Baskind and Bowring 2016, pp. 117, 120)

It is worth noting Habian's polemical progression by means of a logical process of reduction that includes a judicious application of non-sequiturs when they lead to supplying an argumentative pivot. In the passage above, he writes that regardless of the Buddhist school, one mind 一心 (Ch. *yixin*; Jp. *isshin*)<sup>19</sup> is the non-dual basis of all the dualistic distinctions such as person and Buddha, heaven and hell, etc. Then, in one fell, polemical swoop, this "one mind" is synonymous with "nothingness" and non-existence, which is argued to result in a passiveness that renders one like a "wafting willow", thereby prohibiting the assertion of positive statements about anything. Based on this definition, Habian is not a Buddhist (at least not yet [again], as this is something that will be briefly revisited after his apostasy), as he makes clear, sweeping statements on Buddhism, not least when he concludes that Buddhism is pointless as it *always* comes down to non-existence.

Zen was a particular challenge as well as target for the missionaries in its emphasis on what appeared to be a quietist meditation, penchant for a non-dual (and non-sensical in the case of koan) exposition, and seeming lack of a devotional element and afterlife discourse. The Pure Land school, however, at least on the surface, undoubtedly presents a completely different face of Buddhism. So much so, in fact, that when Valignano came into contact with its teachings, seeing its apparent sole emphasis on faith in Amitabha Buddha as a means of being reborn in the Pure Land (*sola fides*), he thought that the Pure Land teachings were none other than the teachings of Luther, the very figure whose movement spurred the formation and activities of the Jesuit order (Valignano 1973, p. 31). In Valignano's detailed refutation of the Pure Land in *Japanese Catechism*, there is a sense of the threat he saw the school as posing in its similarity to Christian theological claims, something he ascribed to the work of demons and devils (Valignano 1969, p. 80). One can understand Valignano's reaction to the Pure Land school when considering the Christian lens through which he interpreted the superficial similarities between the two traditions. Habian, on the other hand, would have had a clearer, more faithful understanding of the true ontological and eschatological teachings of Pure Land Buddhism, which, although including teachings on a physical Pure Land infinitely far away, also possessed other interpretations that adhered to the more nuanced, non-dual teachings found throughout Buddhist schools and other mystical traditions. Technically speaking, these two main interpretations of the Pure Land are: (1) the Pure Land of "pointing out the direction and positing [distinct] forms" (*shihō rissō* 指方立相) that posits a Pure Land at an infinitely distant location described as

“ten trillion buddha lands to the west” (西方十萬億佛土); and (2) the “Pure Land of one’s mind” (*yuishin jodō* 唯心淨土), which interprets the Pure Land as a purified state of mind (Nakamura 1999, pp. 543, 1383). Nevertheless, Habian reserves some of his most pointed polemics for the Pure Land school, accusing it of asserting above all others a negative nothingness and voidness.

Now, if you ask what exactly this rebirth might entail, one Pure Land patriarch defined it as follows: “Rebirth is what the other schools call ‘enlightenment’, another name for ‘attaining the Dharma’”. And what is this ‘enlightenment’ and ‘attaining of the Dharma’ in the other schools? It is ‘thusness and non-discrimination’ 真如平等, ultimately ‘Realm of the Void’ 虛空法界, the realization that there are no gods, no buddhas, no Hell, and no Land of Ultimate Bliss...From the point of view of denying the existence of the afterlife, I doubt there is a school to beat it. Maintaining the precepts, breaking the precepts; in the end all is emptiness so there’s no difference. This is what ‘*namu Amidabutsu*’ means. What a comforting teaching for all time! (Baskind and Bowring 2016, pp. 121–22, 127)

As this passage makes clear, Habian is starting with the *a priori* postulate that Buddhism is nihilistic and based on emptiness at its very core, so even a school that is named after the locale of its afterlife (Pure Land school) is the Buddhist school that most denies the existence of an afterlife. Even Ricci and Valignano, European Jesuits and lifelong Catholics, did not take such a polemical tack but rather attempted to refute the school based on ontological arguments, i.e., that a purely spiritual afterlife has no place for the physical attributes that are discussed in Pure Land texts. It was the more sophisticated interpreter of Buddhism and East Asian systems of thought seen in Habian who took this discourse to a polemical extreme by interpreting everything—including things that nominally preclude it—as ultimately nothingness and emptiness. Below, the next section will investigate how the once-Buddhist Christian convert Habian explained the Christian God to his readership.

### 3.3. Habian on the Christian God

Modern commentators look to Habian as an early example of critical inquiry based on his self-conscious critique of the native system as recorded in *Myōtei Mondō*. The work does represent the first example of a native critique of Japanese systems of thought, with Catholic Christianity providing the polemical perspective. Habian, as a Jesuit-educated Japanese native, would have a uniquely insider’s understanding of Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism, precisely because of the filter of his Japanese education and time as a Buddhist monk. But this very background would also color his understanding of Christian theological claims, as well as how he chose to present them to his Japanese audience. When he turns to his discussion of the Christian God in *Myōtei Mondō*, he starts with a reiteration of the fundamental differences between the Buddhist and Christian visions.

As there is always a difference in all things between the empty and the real, it is vital to fully grasp the distinction between the false and the true when it comes to the Lord of this life and the next. As regards the likes of the Buddha and the kami that I have discussed above, you can clearly tell from the teachings that you have heard so far that they are all false and cannot satisfy our hopes as regards either this world or the next. This is because the epitome of Buddhism lies in emptiness, and the Buddha himself is emptiness. Moreover, since the deeper meaning of Shintō lies in yin and yang, what we call kami simply points to yin and yang. So as emptiness does not exist, being identical to nothingness, that which they call Buddha is not an exalted being and certainly not worth calling Lord or anything else. (Baskind and Bowring 2016, p. 166)

Up to that point, after spending the entirety of the work insisting on the empty nature of Buddhist, Shintoism, and Confucian truth claims, to set off the ensuing discussion of the Christian Deus, he emphasizes one more time the ineffectuality of native systems of



thought, which, based on emptiness and nothingness, posit no creator deity, thus there can be no soul, no afterlife, meaning that without this conception of God, everything is empty. As the first line makes clear, he sets off the “empty” with the “real”, thereby putting them in antithesis. When Habian turns to his exposition on Deus, he posits the argument that a creation requires a creator, using the classic Watchmaker Analogy.

Now then, if we ask what kind of a lord this Deus is, he is the creator of all phenomena in Heaven and Earth. So if you accept the logic that there must be a single creator of all things in Heaven and Earth who is provided with all goodness and all virtue, then you will recognize him as the true Lord Deus. Now everything in existence that is endowed with material form must have a beginning; and if it has a beginning, it cannot have begun by itself without the aid of an external force...If we think about it in this light, how could all phenomena in Heaven and Earth not result from the work of a creator? To claim that Heaven and Earth arose naturally from void and emptiness and that all things came about through the spontaneous union of yin and yang, is even more ridiculous than (to stick with our example) to claim that this house arose naturally from void and emptiness or that the wood and bamboo simply came together on their own to form its fences and walls. (Baskind and Bowring 2016, p. 166)

In his argument for the existence of a creator who stands above his creation, Habian sticks to his central thesis that to deny such a paradigm is to embrace the idea that all naturally arose from void and emptiness. The way the story is told in Genesis, God did indeed speak the world into existence from a condition of uncreated nothingness, as creation *ex nihilo* presupposes a nothingness/voidness onto which creation is imposed. This understanding does not negate nothingness and emptiness as an expedient for the creation paradigm, but rather as the basis, active agent, and goal of religiosity. Habian takes pains to mention that the workings of yin and yang, which could possibly be mistaken for a catalyst of creation, are “more ridiculous” than to assert that something designed, such as a house or a universe, could spontaneously form on its own. Habian states elsewhere that the Creator must have consciousness and intelligence, something he denies yin and yang, which are mere forces, perhaps much like the way gravity or electromagnetism are viewed today. Both of these forces, while remaining invisible themselves, have a visible influence on physical matter. When Habian moves from the example of a house to the universe as a whole, he continues in this line of argument.

Now just look up at the sky. It should be obvious that, even though he is invisible, there must be a Lord who governs the motion back and forth of the stars in the firmament, which move by themselves so much less easily than a ship. And now look down. Take this earth, so much larger than a rock but effortlessly carved out. How can you possibly deny the Lord exists just because you cannot see him? Indeed, that one cannot see Deus is precisely the point, Why? Because everything that has shape and form, no matter how large it might be, must have a limit. It is said there is nothing as large as Heaven and Earth but since they are part of the material world, they can be measured. If the essence of Deus were measurable, he would not be Deus. Therefore, he is not endowed with shape and attributes. We call this *spiritual sustancia*, because it refers to essence without materiality. And essence means ‘not empty’...By ‘not empty’ we mean that his essence is the source of unlimited wisdom, which we call *sapientissimo*, the source of immeasurable compassion, which we call *misericordissimo*, and Lord of justice and purity, which we call *justissimo*. As he embodies all good and all virtues, lacks not the smallest thing imaginable and is devoid of all evil, we say that he is essence, in other words not empty. According to the scriptures he is also called *omnipotente*, Lord of all things. With his ability to do everything, he created this Heaven and Earth and all things therein out of nothing. (Baskind and Bowring 2016, pp. 170–72)

As he closes his argument against Buddhism, Habian repeats the Watchmaker Analogy, asserting that such a beautiful and well-ordered universe requires an architect. He then cites the fact that Deus cannot be seen as proof of his existence, as any form or representation would put a limit on his limitlessness, thus moving into a non-dual mode of description. In accordance with his Jesuit education, steeped in a scholasticism influenced by Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism through Aquinas, Habian calls this aspect of Deus *spiritual sustancia*, which he terms “essence without materiality”. “Essence” is then further defined as that which is “not empty”, thereby directly putting Deus’s nature in opposition to what Habian claims to be the baseless basis of Buddhism—emptiness.

It is interesting to note that Habian, a trained Zen monk, did adopt the polemical tack of his fellow Jesuits while he was in the Christian ranks and did so in a way more vehement and thorough than any of his colleagues. With a vastly more nuanced understanding of Buddhist emptiness and nothingness, and perhaps possessed by the desire to prove his fidelity and dedication to his adopted religion, he applied a completely nihilistic understanding of emptiness/nothingness to Buddhism as well as to all the other schools of Japanese thought. What makes Habian particularly interesting, however, is how he turned this polemic on its head after he apostatized and returned to the Buddhist fold. Less than two decades after writing *Myōtei Mondō*, he produced the text *Hadaiusu* 破提字子 (Deus Destroyed), in which he refutes Christian doctrine from the perspectives of Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism, and Confucianism. Whereas above there is the denial of non-sentient forces such as yin and yang as being able to create the universe without Deus as an intelligent and conscious creator, in *Hadaiusu*, Habian says:

All the following stem from the original wellspring of the Pure Undisturbed Absolute: Yin and Yang were born; the pure and turbid, dynamic and quiescent material force came to exist; heaven, earth, and man together produced the myriad things...All these comply with the double variance, the pure and turbid, dynamic and quiescent principle...The adherents of Deus are not the ones to surpass Confucius or excel Lao Tzu. Their creeping tendrils of sophistry, their twisted vines of discord I shall sever at the root! (Elison 1973, p. 267)

It is beyond the limits of this investigation to pursue Habian’s career post-apostasy, but *Myōtei Mondō* and *Haidaisu* together do provide revealing insights into how the Buddhist concept of emptiness fits into the spectrum of apophatic and cataphatic approaches to the affirmation or denial of the ultimate within religious dialogue. Although the three figures examined above do not represent anywhere near the entire story of the initial Jesuit encounter in East Asia, their writings and legacy are among the most important and enduring within that historical episode. As it turns out, although the Jesuits did not meet their own expectations of success in the East Asian mission—they were ultimately expelled from both Japan and China—the information they brought back to the West planted in the European imagination the seeds of a new discourse, that of the Buddhist East with its existence-denying and emptiness-worshipping ways. The view of Buddhism engendered by this discourse has not been completely shed even in the present day.

#### 4. Conclusions

Perhaps the biggest polemical challenge Christianity ever faced was distinguishing itself from its mother religion, Judaism, in its early history while it was still being repressed by Rome and not yet possessed of a widely accepted orthodox doctrine. As the Jewish–Roman Wars enflamed the Holy Land and the Roman animus became focused on the Jews, nascent Christianity found even more reason to definitively distinguish itself doctrinally and institutionally from Judaism, a process that entailed moving away from a common ground to a related, even dependent, yet new paradigm on which subsequent developments could be accommodated. This polemical process lasted centuries, was filtered through scholasticism in the Middle Ages, and Christian apologetics today retain elements and strategies established during this early, formative period. The Jesuit mission to East Asia a millennium and a half later represented another monumental challenge, but one that

moved in the opposite direction, that is, toward establishing a common ground on which a meaningful dialogue could be conducted between fundamentally different worldviews and languages.

Interesting similarities and divergences can be seen between the polemical strategies of the three figures of Ricci, Valignano, and Habian through their respective texts of *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, *Japanese Catechism*, and *The Myōtei Dialogues*. Ricci attained and applied a high level of scholarly acumen in his approach that attempted to appeal to a common ancestor within Chinese intellectual/spiritual systems, specifically Confucianism, that he could use to entice eventual converts to “return home” to the original monotheism that he located in pristine Confucianism. Like Valignano and Habian, he saw Buddhism (and Daoism) as irredeemable and merely a source of error that leveled a corrupting influence on Confucianism. One could perhaps characterize his polemical approach as “accommodation with condition”, that is, accommodating the native system as long as it was accepted in its most recent and refined iteration of Christianity. To be sure, it is an integrated and nuanced approach that requires a thorough familiarity with native modes of thought. Valignano did not attempt to locate common ground between Christian doctrinal claims and those of East Asian systems of thought but used the infrastructure so provided as a foil, even an antithetical analogue, of the Christian doctrinal claims. This entailed comparing the Buddhist Pure Land to the Christian Heaven, buddhas to Jesus, and God (as the First Person in the Trinity) to Nothingness or Emptiness, thereby refuting the Buddhist systems on Christian terms. This approach could perhaps be called “accommodation for refutation”, as Valignano in effect sets up a straw man by refuting Buddhist religiosity based on Christian doctrinal claims. In *The Myōtei Dialogues*, Habian takes a tack different from his two predecessors by attacking all three systems of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism as ineffectual and empty, although he reserves his harshest polemic for his erstwhile affiliation with Buddhism and, in particular, the Zen school. He presents it as conceived in, promising, and delivering nothing but emptiness and nothingness, which he contrasts with the “somethingness” of Deus, the source of all and judge of post-mortem eventualities. These three figures represent a contrastive and informative sample of three polemical approaches that were employed in the Jesuit mission to East Asia, one of the richest and best documented intercultural episodes in the premodern period.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kiri Paramore points out that two of these three texts (*Tianzhu Shiyi* and *Myōtei Mondō*) just also happened to be among the three most popular texts in early seventeenth-century Japan written in either Chinese or Japanese. Paramore, *Ideology and Christianity in Japan*, p. 12. While “Fabian” is the Western spelling of the name given to the figure I refer to as “Habian”, Paramore’s usage of “Habian” (“Fabian” in Japanese pronunciation) influenced a good deal of subsequent scholarship, and I have opted to follow this usage here.
- <sup>2</sup> Reading Xavier’s first-person account of his time in Japan is revealing for how European sensibilities interpreted and reacted to the East Asian cultural milieu during the initial encounter. See [Schurhammer \(1973–1982\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> It should not be thought that the Christian missionaries believed that orthodox Christianity had already arrived in Japan, but rather that Anjirō’s presentation of Japanese religion seemed to suggest that there were concepts that were, if not Christian, at least readily translatable and built upon a common basis. The truth of the matter was that there was no common basis, thus the initial difficulty in translating terms and concepts.
- <sup>4</sup> “Dainichi” proved to be a knotty term for the Jesuits. This is the translation that Anjirō originally provided for “God”, a term that ultimately proved misleading for Xavier when he went around exhorting people to “pray to Dainichi”. Interestingly, the translation for “devil” also proved difficult, as it was originally rendered as “tengu” 天狗, which refers to a mountain-dwelling, trouble-making goblin that is often portrayed as skilled in the martial arts. For this discussion and others on the difficulty of

translation in the Jesuit Mission to East Asia, see [Komei \(2009\)](#). For the discussion on “tengu”, see *ibid*, pp. 56–63. For additional background on the milieu the Jesuits faced in 16th and 17th century Japan, see ([Kanda 2010](#), pp. 49–70).

This work, written by an unknown mystic in Middle English, is a practical guide for the contemplative on the path of union with God. The meditations so described and the path itself are not so different from the way the path is described in the Buddhist literature, especially the records of Zen masters. For an introduction and translation of this work, see [Johnston \(1973\)](#).

The clear distinction (and at times opposition) between “beliefs” and “practices/works” as found in Christianity does not translate in a Buddhist context. While “practice” 行 and “belief” 信 have their own terms and contextual nuance, both are fundamental aspects of lived religion in Buddhism, and one does not obviate the place of the other.

The topic of terms and translation receives a nuanced and considered treatment in [Krämer \(2010\)](#). He investigates fundamental terms such as “law” and “teaching” in a Buddhist context and fleshes out fundamental aspects of discourse formation in the process.

For details, please see [Baskind \(2014, p. 41\)](#).

For a lucid and accessible work on the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity, see [Thelle \(1996\)](#).

Ricci was a talented linguist, to be sure, but he also received the best education his society could provide. He studied philosophy and mathematics at the Roman College and had Christopher Clavius, a mathematician and friend of Kepler and Galileo, as his teacher. His knowledge of contemporary math and science turned out to be a huge boon for his activities, as the newest advancements in European technology piqued the interest and attention of educated Chinese natives, some of whom eventually went on to receive baptism.

This shortest of the Mahāyāna sutras is only 260 characters in length and is among the most beloved and widely-chanted sutras in East Asian Buddhism. As its name implies, the text is presented as the “heart” or quintessence (*hr̥daya*) of the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*). For a precis of its history and authorship, see ([Buswell and Lopez 2014](#), p. 657). For a more sustained investigation of the place of the text, see [Lopez \(1996\)](#), *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

The discourse concerning the ontological status of the Void 虛空 and the True Lord of Heaven 天主 during the late Ming period has been considerably treated by [Ryō \(2010\)](#). She examines the writings of Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏 (1535–1615) as well as the monks Miyun Yuanwu 密雲圓悟 (1566–1642) and Feiyin Tongrong 費隱通容 (1593–1661), three of the staunchest defenders of Buddhism in the face of Christianity. The latter two monks were also teachers of Yinyuan Longqi 隱元隆琦 (1592–1673), the founding master of the Ōbaku school in Japan.

The Supreme Ultimate 太極 is a philosophical term that has its origins in the *Zhuangzi* and is also associated with the cosmological paradigm in the *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing* 易經). As the term developed during the Song dynasty, it began to refer to the phenomenological reality that includes the modalities of the two polarities of yin and yang. See [Zhang and Ryden \(2002\)](#), *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 65–66.

[App \(2012\)](#) has investigated this claim in depth in *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Rorschach/Kyoto: University Media, 2012).

See [Valignano \(1969\)](#). All translations from this text are my own.

Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in Habian and his importance in the landscape of Japanese intellectual history. [Paramore \(2009\)](#) treated Habian in some depth within the larger discussion of Christian discourse in Japan, and [Baskind and Bowring \(2016\)](#) provided a complete annotated translation of *Myōtei Mondō*. In addition, [Shaku \(2009\)](#) and [Kajita \(2014\)](#) represent two monographs in Japanese that wholly treat Habian and reevaluate his role in Japanese thought. [Sueki \(2014\)](#) provides photographic reproductions of the earliest *Myōtei Mondō* manuscript, as well as a series of research articles on the content of the text.

The following summary is based on [Baskind and Bowring \(2016\)](#), pp. 5–7.

The earliest translation of *Myōtei Mondō* into a Western language is by Pierre Humbertclaude, the French Marist. He published his translation in two issues of *Monumenta Nipponica*. See [Humbertclaude \(1938, 1939\)](#).

This is a multi-valent term, but its central meaning in Chinese is that the “one mind” serves as the ground of being and the principle (*li*) for all phenomena (*shi*). See [Buswell and Lopez \(2014\)](#), pp. 1031–32.

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