



Haruko Nawata Ward, *Women Religious Leaders in Japan's Christian Century, 1549–1650*

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“LUZIA de la Cruz... was taken by force by her relatives to her father’s house... ‘all the way crying out aloud, *I am a Christian, I am a Christian.*’ She escaped, and running back to... [the place of punishment], stepped back into the sack herself, and rolled down with her companions so that people would not think that she apostatized.”

The above account of a Japanese woman courageously choosing to undergo the *tawarazume* form of torture in 1614 is only one of the many memorable scenes

that Haruko Nawata Ward paints of the vibrant women religious leaders in what C. R. Boxer has indelibly dubbed Japan's "Christian Century." In portraying these women, Ward builds on the work of many prominent Western and Japanese scholars, as evidenced in the voluminous notes throughout the book. However, this work is not a mere summary of their work. In this volume Ward attempts to "reconstruct the stories of these women" (29) by incorporating many sources, including primary Jesuit sources, concepts from Japanese Buddhist and Shinto studies, recent feminist perspectives, and religious scholarship on sixteenth century Europe and Asia.

The work is organized creatively around the motif of *byōbu*, Japanese painted folding screens, some of which give intriguing glimpses of anonymous Japanese women. Ward divides her text into four sections on "Nuns," "Witches," "Catechists," and "Sisters" respectively, and in each one she highlights particular individuals, usually upper class women. She asserts that this division should not be taken strictly, but that these Japanese women "are hybrids, a synthesis, amalgamation and fusion in which the blending of both European and Japanese elements produced something new" (29).

In section one Ward focuses on Hibiya Monica, the daughter of a wealthy Sakai merchant. Inspired by her reading of the lives of the saints, Monica desired to devote her life to God, and lived as a Kirishtan *zaiken* ("stay-home-nun"). Another "nun," Naito Julia, was a widow of a warrior and was a Buddhist *bikuni* (ordained nun) and abbess prior to her conversion. Her leadership was crucial in organizing the *Miyako no bikuni*, a group that devoted itself to chastity, poverty, and obedience, and they were later punished and exiled in 1614 to the Philippines where Naito and some of her successors continued to try to foster their distinctively Japanese Kirishtan society.

The second part is a section that is different from the others in that it focuses on "witches," in particular the Queen Ōtomo-Nata "Jezebel" whose daimyo husband, Ōtomo Sōrin, was a great supporter of the Jesuits in Bungo. Ward clearly wants to revise the Jesuit view of her as an evil queen ("Jezebel"), pointing out that the idea of "woman" as evil was a long-standing rhetorical device of European religious leaders as diverse as John Knox and Ignatius Loyola. Ward emphasizes Jezebel's devotion to the Shinto cult of Hachiman, and even views her rather romantically as fostering nationalism with her attempt to bring unity and stability to Japan. Ironically, Ward also points out that Jezebel subsequently became much less hostile to Christians, and implies that she might have converted if the Jesuits had given her a chance.

The third part, on "women catechists," seems to be the broadest category. This section highlights one of the most well-known Japanese women, Lady Hosokawa Tama Gracia. Her identity as the daughter of Oda Nobunaga's killer, Aketchi Mitsuhide, has often eclipsed her more vital role as a Kirishtan scholar and teacher of women catechists. Anyone who assumes that Japanese Kirishtan women simply followed their male superiors and were uninterested in theological matters should read about the voracious intellectual curiosity of Tama Gracia. Her case also reveals

the suffering of some Kirishtan women in enduring difficult marriages with hostile husbands (whereas Jezebel's husband was eagerly allowed to "annul" their marriage). Ward argues that Tama Gracia's death—which is often portrayed as a loyal *junshi* (murder-suicide) at the order of her husband—can be better understood as her acceptance of the idea of martyrdom from reading the Japanese Kirishtan works such as Thomas á Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*.

The last section focuses on "sisters" who were part of *confrarias* (confraternities) that engaged in works of mercy such as teaching, working among the sick, care for orphans, and sheltering the poor. She particularly focuses on Justa of Nagasaki, who provided leadership and even developed a code of conduct for women in a confraternity. Ward questions previous claims, such as the existence of separate women's branches and the assertion that they survived the persecution. This section, though an important part of the Kirishtan account, lacks a strong narrative or personality, perhaps because there are few references in the sources to Justa, the only commoner featured in the book.

This last point reveals that, despite the many examples of Kirishtan women in Japan during this time, Ward is very dependent on a limited number of sources, mostly Jesuit sources, since many of the Japanese sources have not survived. Thankfully, her most important source, the Jesuit Luís Fróis, was an astute observer of many aspects of Japanese society (though, as Ward reminds us, not all of his work has survived). Given the nature of the sources, Ward's claim to a recovery of "a true picture" or "the true identity" of these women (191, 290), is an ambitious and difficult task. Though she repeatedly shows that certain Shinto-Buddhist teachings such as the *ketsubon*—a "Blood Lake" where women could be forced to suffer after they died—discriminated against women, her strongest criticism is leveled against Neo-Confucianism in severely reducing the freedom and activities of women. Ward seems to view Christianity overall as offering women in Japan the freedom and flexibility to take up positions of informal spiritual leadership. The Tokugawa *bakufu* not only brought an end to the "Christian Century," but it also brought an end to what Ward would see as a more constructive time for women's identities. Ward's criticism of Japanese society since the seventeenth century also questions the accepted narrative of progress for women in modern history.

As Ward admits, a study like this often brings more questions than definite answers. In her use of a wide range of sources, Ward has painted very colorful and insightful portraits of these prominent Japanese Kirishtan women, providing an invaluable work for understanding Japan's "Christian Century."

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