

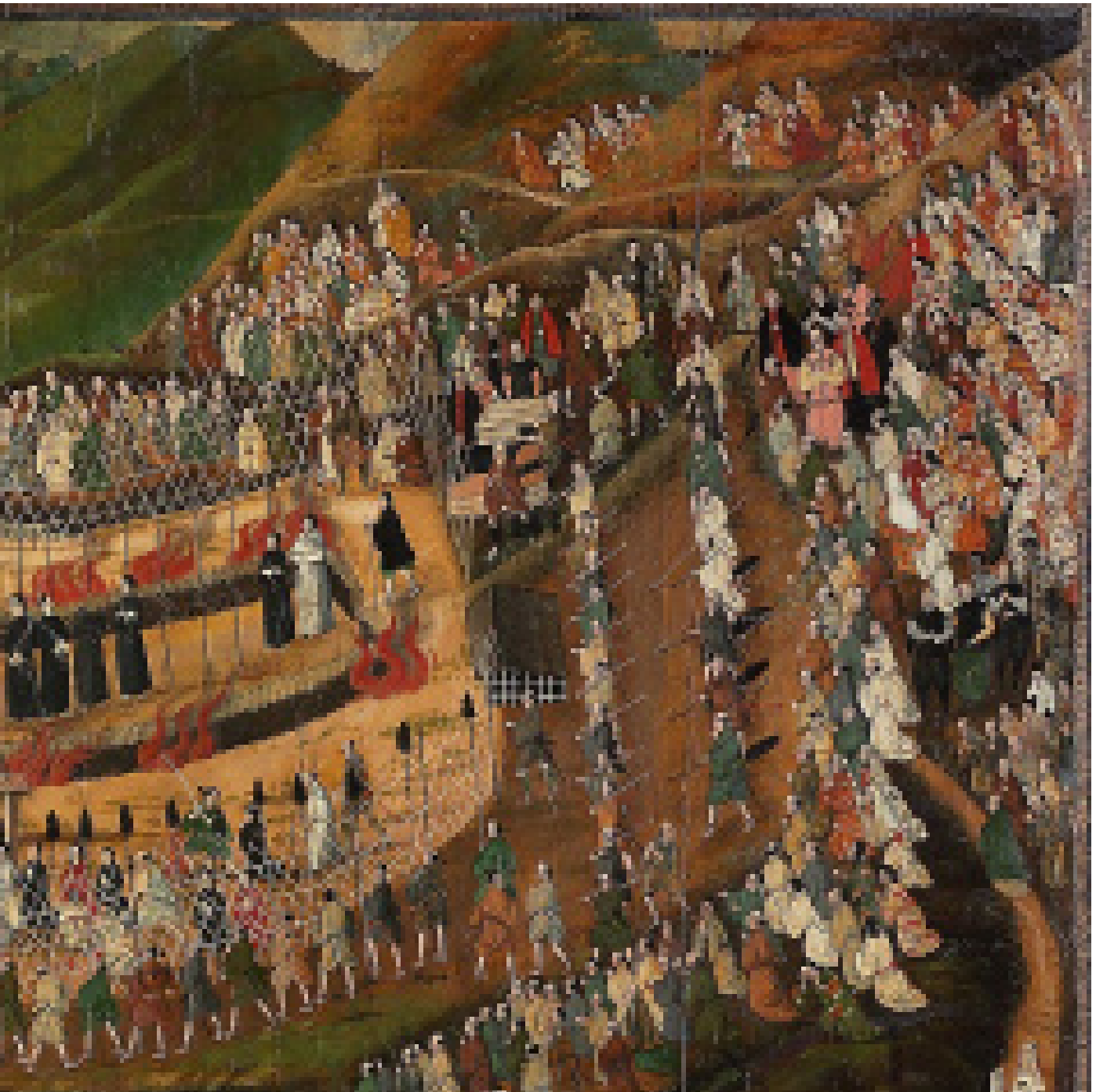
MODERN AGE AND CHRISTIANITY

DAMIANO THE BLIND



*He played the lyre and converted the Japanese.
In that century and in that Far East where some adventurous
Jesuits left a trace, but often also their lives.*

Sabina Pavone



On the night of August 19, 1605, at about midnight, “by torchlight,” two officers from Morindono, *daymiō* of Yamaguchi, put Damiano, the blind lyre player, on a horse and by the favor of darkness led him out of city. Upon reaching the river bank, even before dismounting from his horse, understood what the intent of his “guardians” was: he had long ago converted to Christianity through the preaching of Jesuit missionaries, but the advent of the Togukawa to the *shogunate* had led to a violent de-Christianization of Japan. The Jesuits had then been driven out of many cities, including Yamaguchi, and Damiano had found himself filling serving as a substitute for the community of Japanese converts (*kirishitan*) by “catechizing the Gentiles, preaching to the faithful, baptizing the children, burying the dead et procuring [...] to preserve them in the faith” (*Life and Glorious Death of Damien, Japanese Blind*). Morindono, however—“impelled on the one hand by the ancient and angry hatred against the faithful of Christ, and on the other stimulated importunately by the Bonzes and priests of the idols”—“resolved to drive Damiano out of the world,” so as to discontinue any enterprise of evangelization of his lands.

Like many other converts, Damiano’s fate could therefore only be death. The lyre player was well aware of this, and already along the way he had addressed the two officers reminding them that “though blind I know that you are leading me to the public place of justice to take away my life as a Christian,” but this fear had by no means discouraged him or prompted him to abjure the Christian faith. On the contrary, to use the passionate Baroque prose that Jesuit historian Daniello Bartoli attributed to Damiano, the lyre play-

er would have responded fiercely, “Here I am to die. Fry me, boil me alive, roast me, and if you have worse to do to me, do it” (*L’Asia*, 1825, I. III, p. 121). His executioners therefore cut off his head and also cut his body “into minute pieces, throwing part of them into the river and part into a nearby thicket, so that they might not come into the hands of Christians.” The shrewdness was not enough, however, and in the morning some of those Christians “with God’s help” retrieved his head and left arm, which were then taken to the Jesuit church in Nagasaki, then still active, to be venerated as holy relics.

THE UNEXPECTED ANTI-CHRISTIAN INVOLUTION

How was it possible for the situation to have deteriorated to such an extent compared to 1549, the year when Francis Xavier landed in Japan? “The Apostle to the Indies” had then written to Ignatius of Loyola that the Japanese could not be treated in the same way as the sparsely civilized peoples of the New World and that one had to have respect for their culture and adapt to the rules of their social living. Xavier’s lesson had been taken up by the next generation of missionaries, and Alessandro Valignano in the *Ceremonial for Missionaries to Japan* (1583) had formalized his proposal by eliciting significant adherence to Catholicism from some warlords. The great ambassadorship to Europe of some of these young converts (1585), received by Gregory XIII himself, had represented a further stage in the propaganda strategy of the Society of Jesus aimed at exalting the order’s missionary policy. This phase had been very short-lived, however. Having ascended to the *shogunate*, Toyotomi Hideyoshi had expelled the

SABINA PAVONE



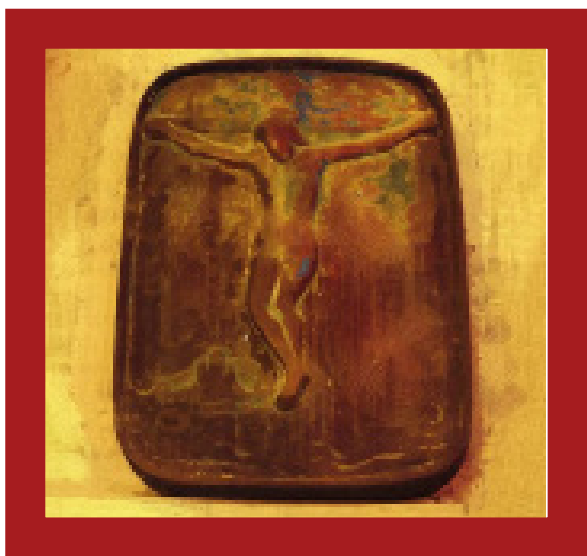
Full professor at the University of Naples L’Orientale, she teaches History of Christianity and History of Missions. She is part of the Scientific Direction of *Prometeo*. Since 2011, she is in the Scientific Committee of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, the series of the publisher Brill *Jesuit Studies*, and since 2020 she is in the Executive Board of the Associazione Italiana di Public History (AIPH). She is involved in Digital and Public History projects and on the scientific committee of Digital Indipetæ Database (Boston College). She wrote with Franco Motta *Lessico della storia moderna* (Carocci, 2024) and she coedited with Valeria Merola and Francesco Piran *Personaggi storici in scena* (eum, 2020), with Giuseppe Capriotti and Pierre-Antoine Fabre, *Eloquent Images. Evangelization, Conversions and Propaganda in the Global World of the Early Modern Period* (Leuven UP 2022). The story of *Damiano the blind man* is one of the conversion stories collected in Chiara Petrolini, Vincenzo Lavenia and Sabina Pavone’s volume *Sacre metamorfosi. Racconti di conversione tra Roma e il mondo in età moderna*, Viella 2022.



Martyrdom of Nagasaki, attributed to German painter Johann Heinrich Schönfeld. Above is another depiction of the same theme: *Martyrdom of Nagasaki*, 1622, kept at the National Heritage Board in Singapore.

Jesuits for the first time in 1587. Yet in those very years conversions had been multiplying: between October 1589 and October 1590, 21,000 people had been baptized; then Valignano himself in 1591—when the great ambassadorship returned—was received at court, offering the *shōgun* a series of gifts. On that occasion Hideyoshi, while not revoking the edicts, had nonetheless allowed ten missionaries to reside in Nagasaki, which enabled the Jesuits to maintain some bases in semi-clandestine status that fostered conversions. The growth of the *Kirishitan* community (involved in some cases in local conflicts between warlords) exacerbated the hostility of the central power, between the 1610s and 1630s, so that at the time of Tokugawa Ieyasu's *shōgunate*, a significant number of missionaries (Jesuits and Franciscans) and Japanese converts suffered martyrdom for refusing to abjure the Christian faith. Among the many cases of martyrdom (not only in mission lands, but also in Protestant states), that mission in Japan undoubtedly had the greatest resonance in Europe, not only because of the numbers and the heinousness of the punishments, but because as early as 1627 Urban VIII

beatified the first 26 martyrs (canonized, however, by Pius IX only in 1862), including Paul Miki, the Japanese convert who later joined the Society of Jesus. Among the best-known Japanese martyrs was Marcello Mastrilli, who, during his illness following a serious incident, had a vision of Francisco Xavier encouraging him to leave for the Rising Sun rather than die. It can be said that Mastrilli — eager to travel to a Japan now closed to Europeans and Christians — planned his own future martyrdom, which occurred in 1637. Among the Japanese converts who devoted themselves to martyrdom, the case of Damiano the Blind, whose profession as a lyre player and storyteller was adapted to Christian preaching, is a typical example of the hybridization and adaptation between cultures that the Jesuits used in the East. Moreover, this hybridization also involved art and architecture: if Valignano in the *Ceremonial* devoted a chapter to the construction of churches in the Japanese style, religious iconography was also affected by forms of syncretism between Renaissance and Japanese art, as in the famous *Madonna of the Snows* painted inside the Seminary of Painters founded by the Jesuit Giovanni



One of the *fumi-e* the converts had to step on.

Niccolò in the early seventeenth century.

At the time when the Jesuits began to be persecuted and were forced to abandon their residences in Japan, the converts, and in particular the lyre players who along with the local catechists were familiar with the language, exercised a role as a substitute for the missionaries. Indeed, if a part of the Christian community, not yet sufficiently established, melted away like snow in the sun, those who persisted in the new faith had to adjust to living in hiding and relying on the few rudiments of the Christian faith learned up to that time. Some *kakure kirishitan* communities, lacking proper religious leadership, established a hybrid form of Christianity that saw Christian dogmas paired with aspects of pre-existing Japanese culture. This did not save them from persecution, however. The Japanese inquisitors devised a foolproof system for detecting converts: those suspected of crypto-Christianity were asked-often forced-to step on certain tablets engraved with crucifixes or other sacred images (*fumi-e*). Those who refused were denounced incurring terrible torture and sometimes an actual death sentence. The story of the Japanese martyrs has also recently been brought to the cinema by Martin Scorsese with the film *Silence* (2016) – based on the novel written in 1966 by Shūsaku Endō – where the film’s greatness lies precisely in posing, without easy solutions, the problem of the meaning of evangelization where conversion becomes the certainty of persecution as in the case of Damiano the blind.

In his case we are indeed in Yamaguchi (Aman-guchi, in the sources of the time), near Fukoshima, where *daimyō* Mōri Terumoto (1553-1625), grandson of the better-known Mōri Motonari (1497-1571), reigned in the early seventeenth century. The opening of a Jesuit residence had aroused the hostility of the local bonzes, and when Motonari, hostile to Christians, conquered Yamaguchi, all property belonging to the Jesuits was confiscated and given to the Buddhists. Between 1586 and 1587 the mission was then temporarily restored, and Morindono (as it is called in Jesuit sources Terumoto) made some concessions to the Society fathers, who reopened their houses between 1599 and 1602, when the mission finally declined. Still in 1601 the provincial of Japan, Francis Pasio, wrote from Nagasaki to General Acquaviva of the good state of that community and of Morindono’s willingness toward converts; but in those same months his confrere Valentim Carvalho recorded instead the first changes in the policy of the local lord, who had changed his attitude toward Christians by conforming to the policy of persecution carried out by the Togukawa clan who had risen to the position of *shōgun*.

THE PROSELYTIZING OF LYRE PLAYERS

The Japanese tradition of lyre-players (*Biwa-Hōshi*), comparable to Provençal troubadours in their talent for combining verse and music, was consolidated in the 13th century; it was not necessary to be blind, but very often these figures were, and although they mostly came from a disadvantaged social class, they had a recognized status within Japanese society. Upon their arrival in Japan, Francisco Xavier and his companion Cosme de Torres immediately sensed the potential that lyre players could represent for the evangelization of those lands, and it was in Yamaguchi, in 1551, that they converted the troubadour Ryōsai, who took the name Lourenço, later joining the Society of Jesus as a lay brother. He was the first to combine indigenous music with verses from the Bible to induce conversion and teach Christian doctrine not only in Latin but also in Japanese. His disciple was the very young Tobias, and then Damiano, “personaje bastante sui generis” (as Luís Fróis calls him in a letter dated September 20, 1589) as well as a multifaceted figure who succeeded in finding a harmony between the two cultures, the Christian and the Japanese. At the end of the 1580s, after the expulsion of the Jesuits from Yamaguchi, Damiano in fact found himself exercising a function



The Twenty-six Martyrs of Nagasaki, engraving by Wolfgang Kilian Habsburg, 1628.

as a substitute for the missionaries, not only preaching the truths of the Christian faith but also intervening publicly against the bonzes of the Shaka (Xaca) sect to reiterate that the only salvation could be had through Christianity. This costs him an initial denunciation with the “viceroy” of those lands, from which he managed, however, to emerge unscathed. Damiano maintained relations with the vice-provincial Alessandro Valignano, who was in Nagasaki and also exercised a typical function of missionaries in the East, that of exorcising the possessed and the possessed. Although there is no consensus on the exact date and place of his martyrdom, the most widely accepted hypothesis is that it occurred on August 19, 1605, near Yamaguchi, on the bank of the Fushinogawa River. His head and one arm were found by the Christian Bento and sent to Nagasaki as evidence of his torture, evidence that allowed Damiano to be included in the list of Japan’s 188 martyrs (almost all lay people) beatified in 2008 by Benedict XVI.

The story of the lyre player Damiano the Blind circulated in Italy within a few years of the events described, as evidenced by the numerous versions of his martyrdom. The original source is a *littera annua* from Japan, one of those letters that missionaries sent annually to Rome to report on their endeavors. The author of the letter was Portuguese

Jesuit João Rodrigues Girão but it carried the text of an additional missive written by the auxiliary bishop of Funai, Jesuit Luís de Cerqueira. The *littera annua* used tales of conversion as a tangible sign of the successes achieved in the most remote parts of the world both with the intention of fostering the intensification of vocations within the Order and to propagate such exploits to the wider European public. Very often, in fact, excerpts of these letters were given to print, especially in Rome and Venice, two of the main places of printing in early modern Italy. In the case of Damiano, his story was published along with other epistles about Japan in 1608 but was later taken up by Giovanni Battista Jacobilli, an Umbrian surgeon close to the Vallicella Oratorian milieu, in a manuscript collection of lives of men and women in the odor of sanctity. In the late seventeenth century, the Jesuit Jean Crasset took it up in his history of the Church of Japan, and later St. Alphonsus de’ Liguori republished it once again, testifying to the attention that still surrounded the memory of the martyrs of the Rising Sun. *Kirishitan* literature of the time also emphasized the vocation to martyrdom of Japanese male and female converts, especially recalling the model of the ancient Christian martyrs in a further short-circuit between Japanese and European traditions. ■