

Strategies of Translating Christian Terminology into Japanese: The Problems Concerning Buddhist Vocabulary in 16th and 17th Century Christian Literature (Dr. theol. Shin Yoshida)

Time frame: 2010-2012

Financed by: Fritz Thyssen Foundation

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A main objective of the project is to research terminology used in the 16th and 17th century Christian Literature and its translation into Japanese. The difficulty of translating Christian terminology and church-related terms from a European language into a non-European language becomes particularly apparent in this study.

When analyzing the translation of Christian Literature from a European language into a non-European language, the primary question that arises is whether the intercultural and theological meanings of the words could be treated as equal, or whether they contain vast differences in their connotations. To be able to answer this question it is necessary – while keeping in mind the concept of translation itself – to analyze the entire spectrum of problems concerning the translation of the Christian Literature from the conceptual, linguistic and theological standpoint.

The purpose of this work is to study a specific set of controversies concerning Buddhist Vocabulary used in 16th and 17th century Christian Literature. Translators and interpreters of church-related documents in the 16th and 17th centuries tended to borrow spiritual terms from the traditional Japanese religious practices, such as Buddhism. Such a controversy of the translation could be explained by the missionaries' strategy at the time. The fact that the essence of the Christian belief was completely foreign to the Japanese forced the missionaries to choose the safe path of a translation in order not to endanger the mission. Because of this, the use of key Buddhist terms in these texts must be thoroughly and systematically analyzed. A comparative approach is to be preferred, as it is useful in isolating various problems of a translation that are related to the intercultural differences.

The comparison of two documents from the 16th and 17th century allows analyzing and answering the following questions: Which difficulties did the translator face? How could one systemize and evaluate these translations? What direct influence did these translations have on traditional Japanese practice, such as Buddhism? Why did the Jesuit missionaries integrate the Buddhist vocabulary into Christian Literature? How did the strategies of translation relate to missionaries' strategies?

As a result, this research will go beyond the study of linguistic difficulties to deal with the broader field of intercultural understanding and interreligious cooperation of Japanese society in the 16th and 17th century. In this regard, the study of these Christian documents provides the opportunity to research the very complex and diverse correlations between the people's intellectual history, beliefs, and language. The fact that such research has not yet been concerned with both linguistics and religious studies, leaves open new views regarding the process of the attempt to promulgate Christianity and the reasons for the failure of Christian missionaries in Japan.