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CHRISTIANITY AND THE UNIQUENESS OF JAPANESE RELIGIOUS MENTALITY

Dong Sull Choi

CHRISTIANITY AND THE UNIQUENESS OF JAPANESE RELIGIOUS MENTALITY:
Why is Christianity not well accepted in Japan?

The emergence of Japan as an economic superpower after the Second World War has been one of the most-spoken success stories of the late twentieth century. Today, the eyes of the world are on Japan as never before in world history. But for all the mass media fascination with how the Japanese think, educate, work, and succeed, most Westerners, particularly Americans, are unaware of the Christian movement and its position in this unique and distinctive cultural society on earth.

The first recorded contact of Christianity with Japan was the arrival of the Spanish Jesuit Father Francis Xavier (1506–1552) on August 15, 1549, during one of the most turbulent periods in Japan’s political history, that of the late Ashikaga Shogunate. Under the special patronage of the three powerful national unifiers Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), Christianity (specifically the Roman Catholic Church) spread like wildfire, a promising beginning.

Francis Xavier reported in a letter to Rome,

The people with whom we have thus far conversed are the best that we have yet discovered; and it seems to me that, among all pagan nations, there will not be another which will surpass the Japanese. They are a race of very fine manners and are generally good and without malice, a people of an astonishingly great sense of honor, who prize honor more than any other thing. A large portion of the people can read and write. They do not have more than one wife. It is a land where there are very few thieves and criminals. And if we knew how to speak the language I have no doubt that many would become Christians.2

Xavier’s optimism must have seemed warranted, for Christianity spread more rapidly in Japan than in any other Asian country, and by the turn of the so-called “Christian century” in Japan, the number of Christian con-
verts reached about two percent of the population. As it turned out, however, that was the high-water mark for Christianity in Japan—and in fact it was more than double the percentage of Christians in Japan today. It was reported in 1606 that there were some 750,000 believers with an annual increase of five or six thousand new converts. Bishop Luis de Cerquiera called Nagasaki, a predominantly Christian city in Kyushu, “the Rome of the Far East.”

The early Tokugawa shoguns, however, began to view the new faith with the suspicion associated with commercial and military imperialism, a suspicion fueled by the rivalry between the Portuguese-supported Jesuits and the Spanish-supported Franciscans, a rivalry which began to threaten the nascent political unity the Shogun’s were trying to impose. In 1613, in the name of the second Tokugawa shogun Hidetada (r. 1605–1622), Christianity was banned. Ten years later, in 1623, the third shogun Iemitsu Tokugawa (r. 1623–1650) initiated an inhuman and brutal persecution with the aim of stamping out the new faith in Japan. In their final stand against the new regime, some 40,000 Christians took refuge at Shimabara Peninsula east of Nagasaki, where after a three-month siege by 120,000 of the shogun’s warriors, virtually all the insurgents in the castle were cruelly massacred. This slaughter in April 1638 rang the death knell for Christianity in Japan for two-and-a-half centuries to come.

What has happened to Christianity in Japan since then? Japan’s Christian leaders today themselves refer to an “invisible church” in a very dynamic and visible society. Indeed, the number of Christians in Japan today is astonishingly small. Despite a 444-year–long church history and the presence of a number of historic denominations, most statistics report that Christians make up less than one percent of Japan’s 124 million population. According to the 1993 Almanac of the Christian World by Tyndale House Publishers, the total Christian population in Japan is only 0.9 percent, which represents a membership of 1,116,000. This is made up of 51 percent Protestants, 37 percent Roman Catholics, and 12 percent others. These figures are all the more striking in the light of the burgeoning Christian population of two of Japan’s close neighbors, South Korea and the Philippines, where Christians make up 32 percent and 92 percent of the population respectively.

However, in the case of Japan small does not mean insignificant. It is generally agreed that the comparatively tiny number of Christians in Japan has a disproportionately large impact on society. Surprisingly, the Christian Bible is recorded as Japan’s best-selling book. Several Christian–sponsored institutions of higher learning, like International Christian University, Sophia University, and Tokyo Christian University, have been excellent
channels for Christian influence in a land where education is highly emphasized and valued.

Nevertheless, since the massive oppression of the early Tokugawa shoguns, a deep-rooted opposition and negative attitude toward Christianity has persisted throughout Japan’s long history. In fact, even after the Meiji Restoration (1868) put an end to the suppression, the great majority of the population still did not accept Christianity, and a negative attitude toward Christianity persists even today.

There are several characteristics of Japanese mentality that oppose conversion to Christianity and which I believe constitute the profound incompatibility between Christianity and Japan: first, an inclusive and tolerant mentality; second, a this-world mentality; third, a group-conscious and watchdog mentality; and fourth, an ultranationalistic mentality.

An Inclusive and Tolerant Mentality:

It is generally understood that prevailing attitudes of Western people in the Judeo-Christian tradition make religion and “exclusive and intolerant” concern. By sharp contrast, attitudes in Japan, historically and culturally, tend to be more “inclusive and tolerant,” permitting people to accept the teachings, customs, and rituals or ceremonies of various religious traditions, native and alien, without any sense of contradiction or heresy.

Foreign observers are often surprised or even shocked to find that religious preference statistics from Japan reveal that most adult Japanese regard themselves as “both” Shintoist and Buddhist, and many homes contain shrines of both of those religions. It is well-known in Japan that the ardent Buddhist believer is at the same time a pious worshipper of Shintoist gods. The majority of Japanese pray before a Shintoist shrine and at the same time pay homage to the Buddhist temple, without being conscious of any contradiction. The co-founder of Sony Corporation Akio Morita once joked: “We are Buddhists, Confucianists, Shintoists, and Christians, but we are also very pragmatic. We also often joke that most Japanese are born Shinto, live a Confucian life, get married Christian-style, and have a Buddhist funeral.”

The 19th-century traveler and writer Isabella Bird noted in her book Unbeaten Trackers in Japan that “The Japanese are the most irreligious people that I have ever seen – their pilgrimages are just picnics, and their religious festivals are fairs.” Responding to this comment, a modern Japanese social critic, Yamamoto Shichihei, clarifies that the Japanese have been neither irreligious nor anti-deity. On the contrary, they have always been “religious and pious”; nonetheless, most of them have not really com-
mitted themselves to any particular organized religion.11 Yamamoto maintains that a characteristic religious mentality allows different religions to co-exist peacefully.

So far as religion is concerned, the idea of “harmony” is both a fundamental pillar and a foremost quality of Japanese society. Consequently, Japan characteristically refuses to accommodate any religion or philosophy which rejects this “peaceful co-existence” with other religions or philosophies. Thus the intolerant and exclusive Christianity was violently denounced as unacceptable. Professor Hajime Nakamura of Tokyo University observes in his book *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* that “whereas Jehovah is the God of jealousy, or revenge, and of justice, as well as of mercy and compassion, it is noteworthy that among the gods and goddesses in the ancient Japanese festivities, ‘harmony and love’ pervade the atmosphere. The gods and goddesses called one another their ‘loving ones.’ They are said to have ‘got drunk with wine and fallen asleep,’ or ‘played together for eight days and for eight nights.’” In the medieval West, condemnation of heretics to burn at the stake was sanctioned by the Roman Catholic authorities. This would never happen in Japan. Among the doctrines of Christianity, the idea of eternal damnation and hell is especially hard for the Japanese to comprehend. Commenting on this point, Professor Masaharu Anesaki of Kyoto University, says that this is the outstanding line of demarcation between Christianity and the Japanese religious mentality.13

A This-world Mentality:

Perhaps no other people on earth are so deeply imbedded in this–world” mentality as the Japanese. While most of the world religions regard this mortal world as the land of impurity and sorrow and the other eternal world as the land of purity and happiness, most Japanese recognize the intrinsic value of life in this world, rather than the other. In Japanese mythology, there is no mention of a future existence, or such notions as heaven and hell, judgment, resurrection, and immortality. Even though Buddhism was very popular and spread all over Japan within a short time, it could not change completely the inclination to the this–world mentality of the Japanese general public. On the contrary, it was the Japanese themselves who transformed Buddhism into a religion centered in this world.14

According to the general view of most Indians, for instance, it is desirable to be delivered from this world. But in Japan, while accepting the theory of the transmigration of the soul on the one hand, most people wish, on the other hand, to be “reborn into this world.” Masatomo Manba, the foremost Confucian scholar, represents the this–world view of the Japanese
general populace when he writes in his *Essay on Japanese Confucianism* that "It is unnecessary to pray for a happy future when one is already in one's fifties. It is even more unbecoming to spend days and nights at a temple on the pretext of praying for a happy future, abandoning one's family and boasting or worshipping at a temple. In this life one should use one's discretion, above all else not to lose one's reputation."13

It stands to reason that this-world tendency became especially pre-eminent during the modern period in Japan and that it has been a major cause in the emergence of materialism. This-worldliness is closely and inseparably related to the Japanese love of nature, which is, needless to say, universal both in the East and in the West, but the Japanese seem unique in their ability to gain a spiritual experience through nature.

Harmony with nature is wonderfully expressed in the Japanese garden. A Japanese garden, which symbolizes the universe in miniature, is considered a exquisite work of art, created to be meditated upon. Rocks, ponds, sand, and stones are harmoniously arranged to symbolize mountains and seas, woods and green fields. There are few flowers in Japanese gardens, for color is not the object; "harmony and variety," symbols of the universe, are sought in textures and shades of green. Japanese architecture, which allows whole walls to be slid aside, lets inhabitants experience nature in all its seasons and moods. Dwellings are thus made harmonious with the heavens and the earth. But this naturalistic character of Japan is not only related to love for the natural world but also, more significantly, to the side of human affairs and desires. Nakamura says, "Just as the Japanese are apt to accept external and objective nature as it is, so they are inclined to accept man's natural desires and sentiments as they are, and not to strive to repress or fight against them. So man's physical nature ranks very high in the average Japanese way of thinking."16

In the early Christian history of Japan, we find a number of cases in which new converts expressed extreme sorrow and agony when told by Jesuit missionaries that the souls of their ancestors had been lost in everlasting damnation, and that there would be no means to rescue them. Probably two of the most-repeated and significant examples raised by opponents of Christianity concern the harshness and impassivity of a Heavenly Father who left Adam and Eve to fall into temptation and commit a sin, and who also let his only Son Jesus Christ suffer and be crucified on the cross. In both cases, the natural minded Japanese felt that the Christian teachings severely violated a natural humanity.

To the Japanese mentality, the statement "Let nature take its course," similar to the basic principle of Taoism, is its unalterable pillar and doctrine, to be applied to every human activity, including religious beliefs,
ethical conduct, cultural activities, and daily life itself. To such a this-world and naturalistic mentality of the Japanese people, the Christian spirit of self-sacrifice and martyrdom was entirely incomprehensible and unacceptable. By the same token, the basic doctrines of the creation of the world “out of nothing by the transcendent God,” and also of the end of human history, which is to be judged by the same God, are too disturbing and even illogical to their mentality.

A Group-conscious and Watchdog Mentality:

In stark contrast to Western ways of living, Japan is an extremely group-oriented and watchdog society. Whereas in the United States and Europe, individuality and independence are highly valued, the society in Japan emphasizes group activity and tight organizations. Much of the Western culture in this area is based on views similar to those of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–1778) theory that society corrupts and debilitates individuals and restricts their self-expression—a direct contradiction to the Japanese view. Expanding on Rousseau, American transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) championed the view that each man must think for himself and act on his own instincts.

The Japanese are probably the most gregarious people on earth. It is almost unthinkable for any individual not to belong to some group, whether it be for purposes of work or hobby, religion or sports, traveling or drinking. There is a strong work–group identification.

Japan is also an astonishingly “watchdog” type of society, where almost everyone keeps an eye on everyone else, not necessarily to ferret out criminal activity but just to see what their neighbors are doing. They live under the constant scrutiny of neighbors, acquaintances, and colleagues. Japanese people are extremely sensitive to the opinions of others. they mold their lives accordingly and are extremely generous about giving unsolicited opinions to each other.

This sort of thinking and living sometimes causes serious problems and pain to individual Christians, at home, in the workplace or at school. Christian workers face dilemmas when trying to conform themselves to company activities or philosophy. Company policies dictate that employees place their interests second to company interests, and that they even be prepared to die (from overwork) if necessary to advance the cause of the company. Most Christians find that their company’s demands make it almost impossible for them to participate actively in church life and activity. “The nail that sticks out is hammered in,” the Japanese proverb cautions.

Professor Siegfried Buss of Tokyo Christian University maintains
that one of the biggest religious issues for every Christian in Japan is the Japanese practice of "ancestor worship," which puts Christians in serious tension with their families and relatives or neighbors. When one member of the family or clan wishes to escape from group obligations, usually the entire family or clan registers strong opposition. In the feudal Tokugawa days, families were grouped into units of five. These were responsible to their lord for the actions of all individuals within the group. If anyone, including children, committed a transgression, every member of the group would be punished equally.

Thus the social necessity of ancestor worship creates resentment toward Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church in Japan, for instance, has issued a handbook for its believers on how to deal with matters related to the dead, and in particular with ancestor worship. A question in the book asks, "I am a Catholic but the rest of my family is all Buddhist. Can I fold my hands before altar or godshelf (kamidana), ring the bell and offer rice and prayers?" The answer is, "Even though the deceased was not baptized, to pray for this person who lived an upright life is the sacred responsibility of family members. When folding your hands before the altar, for instance, you should pray in your heart: 'Oh, Lord, grant him or her everlasting peace.' Ringing the bell and offering rice is an expression of your love and respect towards your ancestors." However, from all indications such compromises have not produced any positive results. I personally believe the so-called Japanese ancestor worship should not be treated in the same way as Christian worship of God. Inspired by the Confucian ethics of filial piety, the ritual is more of a pious expression to affirm one's indebtedness to his or her ancestors, than the affirmation of a deity. In contrast to the rugged individualism which characterizes the West, the Japanese tend to regard themselves as all being a part of the same national entity, which shares the same culture and which includes both the living and the dead.

An Ultranationalistic Mentality:

Let me give an example of Japanese ultranationalism. During the Second World War, for every one American soldier who died fighting in the Pacific War, four surrendered - a ratio of 1:4. For the Japanese, the figures are completely reversed - 10:1, that is, ten died for every one who surrendered, and they are as high as 120:1 for some of the fierce campaigns like the Battle of Midway and the Guadalcanal Operation in the Solomon Islands. A Japanese Shinto scholar once wrote, "To believe and not to act is not to believe." These brave young men, who willingly sacrificed their
lives for their country, did believe.

This is ultranationalism to the letter. Probably there is no other people quite so "introspective" as the Japanese, and no other people who speculate so widely and profoundly on their identity. In the early 1970s, the search for identity reached the level of the so-called "introspection boom" in Japan, when no fewer than forty books were published in a single year with titles such as *What are we Japanese?* One of the pivotal issues of these books hinges on the question *Are the Japanese really unique?* A former U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Edwin O. Reischauer, observes, "To the Japanese the world seemed quite obviously divided between Japan and the rest of the world only. Other categories were not important, such as the lands of East Asian culture, Christendom, or even the human race. The important thing was that one was either 'Japanese' or one was not."  

The notion of Japanese superiority, which became the ideological basis of the ultranationalistic mentality, was most boldly expressed in the concept of the Divine Nation. This is illustrated in the following statement by Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293–1354), a Shinto scholar in the early Ashikaga period: "Our great Japan is a divine nation. Our divine ancestors founded it; the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu Omikami) let her descendants reign over it for a long tie. This is unique to our nation; not other nation on earth has the like of it. This is the reason why our nation is called 'divine-nation.'" Later, Yamamoto Shichihei developed and reinforced this divine-nation theory in his one-time best-seller in Japan, *The Japanese and the Jews*, in which he coined a new word, "Japanism," an ultranationalistic religion which religionizes Japan itself.

Shintoism, being connected with the imperial heritage, became an integral part of Japanism. Buddhism and Confucianism, though of foreign origin, were considerably modified in order to conform with the Japanese national sentiment, and to serve as an ideological identity for the nation itself. For instance, Buddhism was incorporated into Japanism as early as the opening year of the 7th century by the hand of political reformer Prince Shotoku Taishi (574–622), who may be regarded as the real founder of Japanese Buddhism. The foremost Chu Hsi philosopher, Razan Hayashi (1583–1657), also succeeded in making Neo–Confucianism an integral part of the ideological power structure of the Tokugawa shogunate by relating it to Shintoism. Another Neo–Confucian scholar, Ansai Yamazki (1619–1682), furthered Razan's idea and organized a Confucian–Shinto cult. The amalgamation of Buddhism and Shintoism proceeded extremely smoothly throughout Japanese history. Japanism is by nature syncretic, pantheistic, and above all ultranationalistic, combining these three religions together in such a "convenient" way as to plant a spirit of national identity.
among the Japanese general public.

In his famous novel *Silence*, the Japanese Catholic scholar Endo Shusaku (1923– ) says, “This country is a swamp. In time you will come to see that for yourself. This country is a more terrible swamp than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves grow yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp.” In Endo’s opinion, this swamp Japan welcomed the Christian missionaries, who planted the new faith with relative ease, because the mud was soft. The Japanese pantheistic mentality is quite tolerant and inclusive; it shows no stiff and outright opposition. But the swamp consumed the young plant quietly and steadily. Japanism was the source of what Endo calls a “swamp,” which rotted the Christian movement in the premodern period. It seemed also to be the main reason why Christianity remains still a religion of a small minority in Japanese society even today.

Japanism is the real enemy of Christianity, for it tenaciously rejected and violently persecuted the Christians because of the “foreignness” of their doctrines and practices. Japanism also fiercely rejects Christianity because the Christian faith could not be blended into this syncretism. After the Meiji Restoration, Japanism was used by the imperialistic government to promote its expansionist policy. Such an insular ultranationalistic mentality is, needless to say, essentially at odds with the universality of Christianity. Furthermore, Japanism stands in sharp contrast to Christianity because of its “immanent” nature as against the “transcendent” God of Christianity.

These four significant aspects of Japanese mentality—inclusive-ness and tolerance, this-worldliness; group-consciousness and a watch-dog mentality, and Japanism based on ultranationalism—constitute the very root of Japanese rejection of Christianity. It would appear a religion needs to be flexible enough to adopt itself to conform to these aspects of Japanese mentality to gain acceptance and followers in Japan. Perhaps, though, the very inflexibility of Christianity in its core beliefs may be the factor which helps bring about a modernization of the Japanese mentality as Japan increases its association overseas, particularly in America and Europe, and is exposed to societies in which Christian ethics are found in varying degrees and aspects of their lifestyles.

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ENDNOTES


5. Ibid.


17. Quoted from “In the Shadow of the Rising Sun,” p. 31.

18. Ibid.


25. Ibid.

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There are numerous books and articles written in Japanese on the Christian mission and history in pre-modern Japan, but unfortunately most of them have not been translated into English. In the following bibliographical list Japanese books are not included.


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