Christianity in Japan and its Impact on Literature: A Short Introduction

Doron B. Cohen

The conference in which the papers printed in this volume were presented was somewhat unusual. It was held in Japan with the participation of Japanese and other scholars who are well versed in the history of Christianity in this country and the influence it exerted on the local culture and literature, while the majority of the participants visited here for the first time, and their fields of expertise is in the sphere of Jewish Studies. We therefore thought it advisable to offer an introduction, summarizing the history of Christianity in Japan and touching on the impact it has had on its literature, for the benefit of our guests who have not had the chance to study these matters. We also offer at the end a concise timetable, listing some of the historical terms and periods which might not be familiar to everyone.

The history of the Christian Church in Japan can be likened to a play in two acts with a long intermission of over two centuries between them. The first "act" saw the introduction of the Catholic mission in the 16th century, and what seemed to be its firm transplanting in Japanese soil. However, this "act" ended tragically, when the Japanese authorities decided to expel the missionaries and to stamp out the foreign religion with blood and fire. This period is sometimes called Japan's "Christian Century", and alternatively the "*Kirishitan* period", according to the name by which the followers of the religion were known at the time. Following a long hiatus, Christianity was reintroduced to Japan in the latter half of the 19th century, when Japan was forced to reopen its gates to the West after more than two centuries of seclusion. This time both Protestant and Catholic, as well as Orthodox and other missionaries arrived in Japan, driven by the conviction that a new Christian nation could be created before long. However, contrary to their high expectations, the success of the various missions was limited, although the second "act" is still underway, with hradly any dramatic occurrences.

In all likelihood, and as far as historical record can show, the Japanese were introduced to Christianity for the first time with the arrival on their shores of the Jesuit missionaries, led by Francisco de Xavier, who landed in Kyushu in August 1549. The missionaries found a Japan in a state of chaos, during a period known as "the Age of the Warring States", since the central authority

had collapsed several decades earlier and various *samurai*-warrior clans where vying for control of the land, engaged in constant fighting. The missionaries, who gained the protection of some of the powerful Japanese lords, saw their work promising to bear fruit, with Christianity spreading steadily over vast parts of Japan. Their success, however, was relatively short-lived, and changes in the political situation brought a brutal end to the first period of the Catholic Church in Japan.

The arrival of the Europeans occurred within the context of the Counter-Reformation and the European colonialist drive for discovering new lands and acquiring untold riches, as well as converts. It so happened that in a period when the leading colonialist powers were Spain and Portugal, Japan was part of Portugal's share, and so the missionaries arriving here were Jesuit monks who had passed through the Portuguese royal court. This was in accordance with the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), which divided the globe between Spain and Portugal. Only decades later did Spanish missionaries from the Philippines, belonging to the Franciscan, Dominican and Augustine orders, start arriving in Japan as well, creating tension and friction with the established Jesuits, who had made use of the Portuguese trade for their own missionary goals. The Jesuits, after some false starts, did their best to adapt to high Japanese culture while working "from the top down": by converting the *daimyō* (*samurai* lords) they gained the mass conversion of their retainers. The mendicant orders, on the other hand, shunned the Japanese trappings adopted by the Jesuits, and worked among the lower strata of society. By the late 16th century the Jesuits had many churches, several seminaries and a printing press operating in Japan, and tens, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of converts. The Spanish missionaries too were able to erect churches and make many converts. Not many artifacts remain from that period, but some painted screens (known as *Nanban byōbu*) depict in fine detail the arrival of the Portuguese great ship on its yearly visit with all its exotic trappings, as well as the Jesuits and mendicant monks. It looks like a well-established reality.[1]

However, by the early 17th century, political changes in Japan brought about the demise of the mission, the Christian faith having been declared *jakyō* or "evil religion". In 1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu established the dynastic *Bakufu* (or Shogunate) which would rule Japan for two and a half centuries, and which gradually closed down the country to almost any foreign interaction. Following several earlier expulsion orders which were not imposed rigidly, those of 1612 were enforced uncompromisingly, leading to many cases of Christian martyrdom. Among the reasons for this policy was the deep suspicion of the Christians' "double-loyalty", and the fear that they might side with their fellow Christians should there be a foreign invasion. Another reason was the new authorities' wish to form Japanese society on firm Confucian principles, according to which each individual had their designated place in the strict hierarchy, with no room for ideas that might

provoke a different way of thinking and shake up the existing order. The result was that within a few short decades any public expression of Christianity and the almost century-old presence of the Catholic missionaries disappeared from the country. Secretly, a few isolated Japanese communities continued to maintain the faith during the long period of seclusion, and became known as *Kakure Kirishitan* (hidden Christians) when they reemerged from the shadows with the reintroduction of the mission in the 19th century. Among the artifacts associated most strongly with the suppression of Christianity are the *fumie*, images of Christ or the Virgin, mostly made of bronze, on which those suspected of Christianity were forced to trample in order to prove that they were not secret believers.

Figure 1. A *Fumie* (Replica, collection of the School of Theology, Doshisha University)

The dramatic history of the Catholic mission, and in particular the stories of persecution and martyrdom, were vividly described by some of the leading authors of 20th century Japan, such as Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), the author of "Rashomon" and many other great stories and novellas, who also wrote several stories against the background of the *Kirishitan* Period; scholars still debate the meaning of Christianity in his life. Another famous example is the work of a Catholic writer who dealt seriously with crucial moral issues, Endō Shūsaku (1923-1996), celebrated during his lifetime as "the Japanese Graham Greene", and known in particular for his novel *Silence* which

gave rise to great controversy when published in 1966, and which was also adapted for the cinema on two different occasions. *Silence* is the story of a Jesuit priest who secretly enters Japan at the height of the persecution with the aim of reviving the mission, but when apprehended seems to renounce his faith under pressure. The *fumie* holds an important part in the novel, as discussed by Prof. Mark Williams (whose paper was delivered at the conference but published elsewhere).[2]

Christianity was reintroduced to Japan following the persuasive visits by the American Commodore Matthew Perry's flotilla of "black ships" in 1853 and 1854, and the signing of the 1858 Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Japan and the USA, followed by similar treaties with other European nations, including Britain, France and Russia. The missionaries started to flock into Japan as early as 1859 in the guise of spiritual care-givers to foreign residents of the treaty ports. In the early years, Protestant missionaries arrived mainly from the United States, and then from Britain and other European nations; Catholic ones came mainly from France and Orthodox clergy from Russia. In the following decades more than 200 mission societies were established in Japan, representing a wide variety of churches, denominations and national cultures. The first two decades were difficult, as Christianity was still suspect; public notice boards forbidding its practice were not removed until 1873, while freedom of religion was officially guaranteed only with the Meiji Constitution of 1889, albeit with certain conditions. There is no doubt that the fear of death associated with Christianity over two and a half centuries proved an obstacle for quite a while. Still, the early success was so remarkable, and Christianity adopted so enthusiastically, especially among certain members of the former elite *samurai* class, that some optimistic missionaries believed the whole nation would be converted by the turn of the century. The missionaries as well as some of the foreign experts recruited by the Japanese government did their best to convince the Japanese that Christianity was an inseparable part of modernization, for which Japan was so enthusiastic. For a while many were indeed convinced, and even some government leaders advocated making Christianity the religion of Japan as a way of having it accepted as a member of the exclusive club of great world powers. However, even before the turn of the century enthusiasm faded, especially once State Shinto and the emperor system, rather than Christianity and democracy, were chosen and imposed by the government. The Christian community in Japan was a deeply committed one, but it remained a very small minority, and even after another period of great enthusiasm, during the years of American occupation following Japan's defeat in WWII, it never surged to more than 1% of the population.

Still, as has often been observed, the impact of the Christian mission on Japanese society was much greater and wider than the small number of actual adherents would lead to believe. For example, various Christian traditions have been adopted into Japanese folk customs even by

non-Christians, including in particular the celebration of Christmas (although mostly without its religious contents) and church weddings. Christianity's impact is particularly evident in the fields of education, social welfare and medical care. For example, it is estimated that approximately 350,000 students enroll yearly in Catholic educational institutions, from kindergarten to university, and another 300,000 in Protestant institutions. The majority of these students do not come from Christian households, but become acquainted with many aspects of Christianity during their years of schooling. Prof. Takagi Hisao, in his paper included in this volume, reveals some intriguing evidence for the influence of Christianity on education in Japan. On my part I feel I should mention briefly the specific story of the school where this conference is taking place. In the year 1864 a young man from a lowly *samurai* family named Niijima Shimeta left Japan secretly and unlawfully, driven by the wish to study in America in order to enlighten himself and benefit his fellow Japanese. He spent no less than 10 years there, during which he became the first Japanese to graduate from an American college (Amherst) and the first to be ordained a Protestant minister. Shortly after returning to Japan, although faced with strong opposition from the local Buddhist establishment, Niijima Jō, as he was now called, was able to start Doshisha School in Kyoto with eight students in November 1875, and to gradually strengthen and expand it. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by heart disease, so he was unable to fulfill his ambition of turning his school into a full-fledged independent university; this was eventually accomplished several decades after his death, and today Doshisha University is a major academic institution in Japan.

One of the greatest achievements of the missionaries was the translation of the whole Christian Bible into Japanese in cooperation with their Japanese assistants. Although there were some earlier partial attempts at translation, the efforts began in earnest only after the missionaries were established in Japan, and the work commenced under the leadership of the American missionary James Curtis Hepburn. It was a remarkable endeavor, since to begin with the missionaries had very little knowledge of Japanese, and their assistants had hardly any knowledge of the Bible. Still, through a long process of trial and error, learning and revising, they managed to complete the task 28 years after first arriving in Japan. The Bible had an indisputable impact on the writers and intellectuals of Japan since the Meiji Period, as detailed in the paper by Prof. Nakamura Nobuhiro in this volume.

I mentioned the assistants who helped the missionaries with their work; other young men showed great enthusiasm in adopting the religion offered to them, but also in creating their own ways of practicing it and even distancing themselves from the missionaries after a while. A memorable conference of Japanese Christians was held in Tokyo in May 1883, and a commemorative photo

was taken. There are 40 men in the picture, most still relatively young, most still in traditional Japanese dress although sporting various western hats. All have been identified, and all had a larger or smaller part in the development of Japanese Christianity. One elderly person stands out in the front line; he is Okuno Masatsune, Hepburn's teacher of Japanese and his first convert. Niijima is here too (fourth from the right, on the second row), eight years after establishing Doshisha, and next to him stands a young man of great promise who would soon follow in Niijima's footsteps and study in New England. This is Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930), one of the most original intellectuals of early modern Japan. It is impossible to sum up Uchimura in a few sentences. His collected writings consist of over 40 thick volumes. He was an ardent Christian in the New England Puritan vain, a pacifist *samurai*, and the founder of *Mukyōkai* – the Non-church movement – that aspired to return to the roots of Christianity and create a community of individual believers free from the constraints of the established church. He was a greatly admired master who exerted a magnetic influence – both pulling and pushing – on many gifted young men.

Fig. 2. Japanese Christians' conference, Tokyo, May 1883

Here I must beg your pardon for making a personal comment. Decades ago, as a special research and MA student in the School of Theology of Doshisha University, I followed my interest in the life and work of Uchimura and wrote about him extensively, so on leaving here for Amsterdam to start my PhD, I felt that I had a good idea for my research subject: why did several outstanding disciples of Uchimura, who were either baptized or were close to being so, give up their faith once they became committed writers of literature? And why were various other writers and intellectuals of that period drawn to Christianity and influenced by it in their writing, but failed to adopt it as their faith? I was intrigued not only by the faith but also by the fate of many of those tormented figures; several of them committed the ultimate sin of taking their own life, including the great Akutagawa Ryūnosuke whom I mentioned earlier, who ended his life at the young age of 35; several others succumbed to tuberculosis (indeed, it was a lucky literary person of that period who avoided an early death due to the former or the latter cause).

Fig. 3. Uchimura Kanzō

For various reasons, in spite of a promising start, I was not able to make much progress with my research back then, and years later completed a PhD thesis on the Bible translations instead.

However, while we were planning this conference, I came upon Prof. Massimiliano Tomasi's recent book,[3] and to my great delight discovered that not only was he struck by the same idea – independently, of course, as it sometimes happens – but that unlike me he went ahead to realize it. The result is an exciting book, which goes a long way into unraveling the existential dilemmas of some of the leading Japanese writers of modern Japan and the spirit of the time.

Earlier I likened the history of Christianity in Japan to a play in two acts; using a different simile I would say that Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be likened to a fast-forward film; developments that elsewhere took many decades were happening here in the space of a few years, and ideas developed over centuries were thrown at the formerly isolated society causing much excitement and confusion. Apart from Christianity in its variety of forms, socialism, anarchism, communism, nationalism, pacifism, individualism, romanticism, civil rights, women's rights, democracy and many other ideas and trends were introduced and debated by various segments of the intelligentsia, by politicians, activists, writers, critics and even some everyday folk who were listening to or reading the vast output available in the form of countless newspapers, magazines and books. Christianity was often confused with some of these tendencies, partially due to the missionaries, who insisted that progress, enlightenment and even science cannot be obtained without adopting the true faith, and partially due to unavoidable confusion on the part of the Japanese who were trying to absorb it all and find the relevance of these ideas to their private and national lives. And although for a certain time and among a certain group of people Christianity seemed to offer the right answer, and although it may have helped some writers to find their individual voices, it seems also to have led them to a dead end. I will quote one sentence only from Prof. Tomasi's book:

> "Virtually all the Meiji and Taishō writers who embraced the Christian religion eventually surrendered, in different ways, to their skepticism" (Massimiliano Tomasi, *The Dilemma of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature: Metaphors of Christianity*, p. 187).

Prof. Tomasi elaborates on this subject in his paper included in this volume. I will only add that there were also those whose skepticism stopped them a step earlier; they never adopted Christianity, although they were certainly aware of it or even intrigued by it. My personal favorite among the many talented and admirable literary figures of that era is the poet Ishikawa Takuboku, who tragically succumbed to tuberculosis at the very early age of 26. The great scholar of Japanese literature, Prof. Donald Keene, who passed away recently in ripe old age (he was born in New York City in 1922 and died in Tokyo in 2019), named him in a recent biography as "The First Modern Japanese". In spite of his short life Takuboku left behind a body of poetry greatly admired by generations of Japanese and by lovers of Japanese poetry elsewhere. I once read a claim that every

educated Japanese can quote by heart at least one poem by Takuboku, so for some years I conducted an experiment, asking every new acquaintance if they could quote a poem by him; eventually I reached the conclusion that this may have been true for older generations but was not necessarily so for the younger ones.

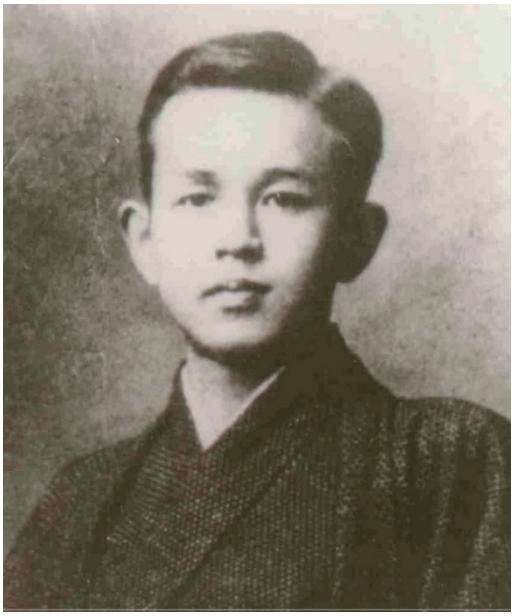

Fig. 4. Ishikawa Takuboku

One of Takuboku's very last poems, numbered 192 of 194 poems written in a poor-quality notebook during the final months of his life and published posthumously as *Sad Toys*, mentions Jesus Christ:

クリストを人なりといへば、　*kurisuto o hito nari to ieba,*
妹の眼がかなしくも　　*imōto no me ga kanashikumo*
われをあはれむ。　　*ware o awaremu.*

When I said "Christ was a man",
My younger sister's eyes full of grief
Pitying me.

On his deathbed, the poet cannot bring himself to share his sister's faith. Although he has studied the Bible and pondered deeply its ramifications to questions of self and love, he cannot take the final leap of faith, and regards Christ as no more than a human teacher. Many others came to share his view, and therefore the scope of Christianity as a practiced religion in Japan remained limited. Still,

through the struggles and the dilemmas of many an outstanding writer in Japan of the past century and a half, a body of literature of immense significance and sometimes of great beauty has been created, and is ours to study and enjoy.

*

A concise timetable

"The Christian Century", also known as the "*Kirishitan* Period"

1543 The arrival of the first Portuguese merchants

1549 The arrival of St. Francisco de Xavier and the beginning of the Catholic mission

1597 Martyrdom of 9 missionaries and 17 Japanese believers

1603 The beginning of the Tokugawa *Bakufu* (Shogunate) and the Edo Period (to 1868)

1612 The *Bakufu*'s ban on Christianity, gradually imposed

1630's The culmination of the process of expelling the foreigners, banning of Christianity and the closing down of Japan both for entering and leaving

The reopening of Japan

1854 The American flotilla led by Commodore Perry forces Japan to reopen

1859 The arrival of the first Protestant missionaries, followed by Catholic and Orthodox ones

1868 The Meiji Restoration and the fall of the Tokugawa *Bakufu* (end of Edo Period)

1873 Unofficial lifting of the ban on Christianity by removal of public notice boards

1887 Completion of the Bible translation by Protestant missionaries and their Japanese assistants

1889 The Meiji Constitution ensures freedom of religion "within limits not prejudicial to peace and order"

Modern Japanese periods

Meiji Period	1868-1912
Taishō Period	1912-1926
Shōwa Period	1926-1989
Heisei Period	1989-2019
Reiwa Period	2019-

Select Bibliography

Boxer, C. R., *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, Berkeley: University of California, 1967

Caldarola, Carlo, *Christianity: The Japanese Way*, Leiden: Brill, 1979

Cary, Otis, *A History of Christianity in Japan: V. 1. Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Missions; V. 2. Protestant Missions*, 1909, Reprint, Two Vols. in One, Rutland: Tuttle, 1976

Cohen, Doron B., "The God of *Amae*: Endo's *Silence* Reconsidered", *Japanese Religions*, Vol. 19, No. 1 & 2 (1994), 106-121

Cohen, Doron B., *The Japanese Translations of the Hebrew Bible: History, Inventory and Analysis*, Handbook of Oriental Studies: Japan, Volume 15, Leiden: Brill, 2013

Cohen, Doron B., "Voices of Dissent during the Russo-Japanese War: Uchimura Kanzō and Yosano Akiko", *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions* 2 (2005), 74-86

Dennis, Mark W. and Darren J. N. Middleton, eds., *Approaching Silence: New Perspectives on Shusaku Endo's Classic Novel*, Bloombsbury USA Academic, 2015

Drummond, Richard H., *A History of Christianity in Japan*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1971

Endo Shusaku, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston, 1969

Hardy, Arthur Sherburne, *Life and Letters of Joseph Hardy Neesima*, 1891, Reprint: Doshisha, 1980

Jansen, Marius B., *The Making of Modern Japan*, Harvard University Press, 2000

Jennes, Joseph, *A History of the Catholic Church in Japan: From its Beginnings to the Early Meiji Era (1549-1873)*, revised, enlarged edition, Tokyo: Oriens Institute for Religious Research, 1973

Keene, Donald, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era*, New York: Holt Rinehart Winston, 1986

Keene, Donald, *The First Modern Japanese: The Life of Ishikawa Takuboku*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016

Motoi Yasuhiro, *Jo Niijima and the Founding Spirit: A Textbook for the Lectures on Doshisha*, Translated by Nobuyoshi Saito and David Chandler, Kyoto: Doshisha, 2011

Mullins, Mark R., *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998

Mullins, Mark R., ed., *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, Leiden: Brill, 2003

Scheiner, Irwin, *Christian Converts and Social Protest in Meiji Japan*, University of California Press, 1970

Tomasi, Massimiliano, *The Dilemma of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature: Metaphors of Christianity*, London and New York: Routledge, 2018

*The source for figures 2-3-4 is Wikimedia Commons.

Notes

1 An Internet search for "Nanban byobu" will lead to many examples on various sites; see also Alexandra Curvelo, *Nanban Folding Screens Masterpieces, Japan-Portugal, XVII Century*, (Paris: Editions Chandeigne, 2015).

2 See Mark Willimas, "The 'Formality' of the *fumie*?: A Re-Consideration of the Role of the *fumie* Scene in *Silence*", in: Mark W. Dennis and Darren J. N. Middleton, *Approaching Silence: New Perspectives on Shusaku Endo's Classic Novel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 43-60.

3 Massimiliano Tomasi, *The Dilemma of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature: Metaphors of Christianity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).