

# Christianity's Failure in Japan

By Shozaburo Kimura

I am not a Christian, nor are any of my kith and kin, but because I have specialized in the study of European medieval history I do have at least a passing familiarity with the religion. In fact, I was once chided by a Catholic nun, "You know so much about Christianity, why is it you do not become a Christian?"

Why? It is hard to say. I cannot claim to be a devout Buddhist or a devout anything else, although I am as likely as any other Japanese to pay my respects at a nearby shrine on New Year's Day. This is very common. Last New Year, 79.5 million Japanese made this annual obeisance, and even this horde was somewhat fewer than the preceding year's 81.75 million because of the heavy snows and the fact that many of Kyoto's leading temples and shrines were closed to protest a new tax levy by the city.

Yet just because two-thirds of the Japanese people turned out at their neighborhood shrine over the New Year's holidays by no means proves that the majority of Japanese are faithful Shintoists. Most Japanese neither know nor care what Shinto's underlying doctrine is. Still they turn out in record numbers. I am one of them, in the sense that I go every year without really knowing why.

The other main contact of most Japanese with Shinto is at weddings. It is true that there are some Christian or Buddhist weddings, but most are Shinto, just as most funerals are Buddhist with only a smattering of Shinto or Christian services. Thus the only contact most Japanese have with Christianity is the occasional wedding or funeral and at Christmas, which is a highly commercialized celebration of consumerism in Japan.

Christianity's peak in Japan was in the latter half of the 16th century, shortly after its introduction, when it drew about 7% of the population. This was the period of Warring States, when the native gods seemed to have abandoned us and Japanese could not trust one another. At this lowest ebb in our history, there were



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some who sought solace in the novel religion that offered a refuge from chaos. Yet those days are past, and today the Christian community is down to less than 1% of the population, a phenomenon that some people have labeled one of the seven wonders of the world. Asked why there are so few believers, we can only respond with a perplexed shrug. Just the same, I would like to venture three possible reasons for the Japanese indifference to, if not distaste for, Christianity.

First, as a people, the Japanese are reluctant to submit totally to a single, absolute being such as that represented by Christ or even the Judeo-Christian God. Unlike the Western theater, Japan's kabuki theater has no director, nor is there a conductor in traditional Japanese music. Likewise, you will find few statues commemorating the feats of illustrious individuals in Japanese cities, and even fewer streets named after great leaders.

Instead, Japanese society makes an effort *not* to distinguish between ruler and ruled. There has been and still is, of course, the emperor, an emotional and for some almost religious focal point; and in the Edo period (1603-1868) the Tokugawa shogun and the many feudal lords below him were the focal points of political and military authority. Today,

the prime minister, the corporate president and other leaders are viewed as somewhat above the crowd. Yet these people are perceived not so much as ruling as representing their organizations.

In Japan, people in positions of leadership are expected to set an example by leading frugal lives, refraining from extravagance or ostentation and staying in harmony with the people below them. The imperial family's simple lifestyle is the epitome of this principle, but not its only example. Corporate presidents and chairmen at the major Japanese corporations seldom make much more than twice what their company chauffeurs make. And anyone who does make a lot of money is taxed at a steeply progressive rate that reflects the traditional Japanese aversion to divisive social differences.

As representatives of the group, people in leadership positions are expected to take an altruistic interest in the welfare of the rest of society and to subordinate their own individual interests to the good of the group. The classic example is the newly appointed corporate president who vows to "foster and protect corporate interests, remaining faithful to my predecessor's hopes and aspirations for the company." Because he is considered not the sole corporate head but rather the representative of the company and the collective will of all who work there, the new Japanese company president is constrained from instituting bold new policy initiatives. Instead he can only slowly bend the company to his will by convincing other people that these new policies are in the company's long-term best interests.

This reluctance to bow in absolute obedience to a single entity explains in part the typical Japanese aversion to monotheistic religions in the Judeo-Christian mold. The more gods available to lend a helping hand at the crucial junctures in life—marriage, death or even the college entrance exam—the better.

Which brings me to the second reason why Christianity has not taken hold in

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Japan: the basic Japanese acceptance of life and nature as is. Nature is not something to be defied or conquered. From the Japanese perspective, there is nothing more unnatural than the Western compulsion to reshape the natural environment. The essence of Japanese refinement is to be found in the exquisite imitation of nature that is the bonsai and in the epicurean dish of clean, raw fish served fresh from the sea.

In this Japanese climate of harmony between man and nature and between man and man, it is nearly impossible to foster cults or individuals capable of commanding absolute obedience in body and soul. In the rare instances when powerfully charismatic personalities do emerge, they are regarded warily and kept at arm's length. This is why Japan has had no true heroes or dictators in the Western sense.

This does not mean the Japanese have no respect or even reverence for others, just that this deference is more commonly expressed toward nature than toward individual human beings. The Japanese awe of and respect for nature as the cradle of human existence is at the core of traditional Shinto belief and remains strong to this day. Every tree has its own spirit, and although nature may rage occasionally with torrents of rain or the whirling winds of a typhoon, its fury is quickly spent and seldom causes irreparable damage.

My third and final reason why Christianity holds little attraction for the Japanese is our lack of the concepts of original

sin and the need for atonement. Told to repent our sins lest we be barred from the heavenly paradise, we are puzzled because we do not perceive ourselves as having done anything wrong. "What terrible things has the Judeo-Christian Westerner done to warrant such an admonition?" we muse.

Of course, the Japanese are as fallible as anyone else. We lie at times and hurt each other at times, but on the whole we believe a little white lie is sometimes the more judicious course and readily forgive each other. With our family-like sense of closeness and trust, we are secure in the knowledge that a sincere apology will be met in the same spirit and that all will be forgiven and forgotten. Because of this ethic, it is considered particularly base and underhanded to stridently demand restitution after someone has freely acknowledged an error or wrongdoing.

The relative ease with which the Japanese are willing to let bygones be bygones probably stems in part from the fact that we are crowded together in an island setting that precludes escape for the offender. Unlike the Straits of Dover, the Korea Strait, the narrowest divide between Japan and the Asian mainland, cannot be crossed by an individual swimmer, no matter how hardy. This may, incidentally, also be one of the reasons for the low crime rate in Japan, a phenomenon Europeans took note of as early as the Edo period.

Related to this is the Japanese reluctance to resort to courts of law in settling disputes. Since a formal trial is consid-

ered likely to exacerbate hard feelings between the disputants, considerable effort is made to settle things out of court. Only someone who has something to hide would hire a battery of lawyers and be a stickler for legal form; and the corollary to this, of course, is that a "good" person is free to be ignorant of the law. From this perspective, it is hard to accept the Christian Day of Judgment. What could be more awful than to be summarily consigned to heaven or hell the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats? To the Japanese such a final, irreversible judgment appears the height of cruelty. Far preferable to recite the *namu amida butsu*, that magical Buddhist incantation that promises to save everyone, saint and sinner alike.

The Japanese are by no means irreligious, we simply are not monotheistic. We believe in gods who protect us, help us and reinforce our ties to each other, and as such we include the spirits of our ancestors among these gods. Every household enshrines its own personal gods, and once a year, usually in mid-August, these gods are joyfully welcomed by their descendants for a visit. So strongly ingrained is this tradition that Japanese trains, highways and air routes are crammed to overflowing at this time of year as everyone rushes to return to his ancestral home. We also have a multitude of local gods who are boisterously carried in portable shrines, *mikoshi*, through the narrow Japanese streets in summer and autumn festivals. These are occasions for feasting and drinking, for renewing our common bonds.

The word religion is believed to stem from the Latin *religare* meaning to bind back, or perhaps from *relegere*, also Latin, meaning to collect again. For the Japanese, the binding force that ties us together is our strong sense of trust and national identity, and the gods exist to help us in times of trial and to reinforce this sense of unity. Little wonder that we feel so little attraction to the sternly monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition. ●

(This is the first of six parts.)