Christianity in a Non-Christian Country: Problems of Japanese Christianity Since 1549

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WHENEVER European Christianity has been carried to a non-Christian country, it has been faced with the double problem of its identification both with the political system and with the culture of the Western world. In Europe, throughout the Middle Ages and long after the Reformation, the Church was closely related to the State. It was able to influence state policy and was subject, in turn, to a measure of state control. Hence, when missionaries came, for example from the West to the East, they brought with them their understanding of Church-State relations. In the minds of the people whom they had come to evangelize, they were regarded not only as ambassadors of Christ, but also as representatives of their own countries, whether they liked it or not. Some missionaries used this situation to bring advantage to their church; but on the whole, they recognized the obligation to save the best interests of the people to whom they had come to proclaim the Gospel, while remaining loyal to the country of their birth.

The missionary Church in a non-Christian country was also faced with the problem of vastly dissimilar traditions which differed not only in degree but in kind from those of Western Europe, but which could not be destroyed nor changed overnight. Further, the missionaries had to ask whether it was right to destroy the culture of the "heathen" before the latter could accept Christ as their Saviour. The Church was able frequently to introduce Western culture to its new home because such countries were eager to absorb Western teachings. New Christians and their leaders tended to feel that, unless the old culture was entirely thrown off in a complete changeover to the Western, Western culture and Christianity (unfortunately the two were regarded as closely connected) would merely remain accessories to their life and traditional ways. But was this really the case, particularly with Japan?

In 1959, the Christian Church in Japan celebrated the centenary of the beginning of Protestant evangelism and the re-opening of Roman Catholic Church work after an interval of three hundred years following the persecution in the sixteenth century. The record shows that the progress of the Church in Japan has not been rapid. Missionaries and Japanese Church leaders have studied the reasons for this slowness, but they have not yet arrived at a satisfactory conclusion.

This article is an attempt to search, in the light of history, for some of the causes which have hindered the growth of the Church. Special attention will be given to the problems of Church and State and of Religion and Culture.

The history of Japan, since the coming of the faith to that country in the early sixteenth century, may be divided into three periods, which will be considered in turn.

I. The Introduction of Christianity

This was brought about by the Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier, in the year 1549, over four hundred years ago. The great event has been described dramatically as follows:

> In June of the year 1549, the same year in which the first Prayer Book of the Anglican Communion was published, a Chinese pirate ship appeared in the bay of Kagoshima at the southernmost end of Japan. As the ship moved toward the port city of Kagoshima, those on board could see before them the volcanic island of Sakura-jima—that is to say, Cherry Island—rising to its smoking summit of 4,000 feet in the middle of the bay. It was too late for the cherry blossoms that give the island its name, but the sight is breath-taking, and one would like to know what impression it made on at least one voyager on board, and whether his ardent Spanish soul appreciated the fact that even nature here might play a dramatic role.[1]

Francis Xaxier not only brought the Gospel of the ruler of the Universe, but he also carried the endorsement of the King of Portugal, the head of the great empire which covered the seas of the world at that time. The Japanese landlords raised their eyes from their continual domestic wars and became aware of the existence of this great power in the West. At about the same time, a sailor was rescued from the wreckage of a Spanish ship and was found to be carrying a gun, a mysterious and extremely effective weapon which could kill from a distance without actually touching the victim, and which was completely unknown to the Japanese heretofore.

For various reasons, political or economic, technical or cultural, the Japanese government and the landlords were attracted to the Western countries and were curious to know more about them.[2] Shogun Oda Nobunaga not only co-operated with the Christian missionaries but also helped and trusted the converted Japanese landlords. Oda Nobunaga's successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, was an aggressive, domineering and realistic character. His ambition was not only to gain complete control of the whole of Japan but to conquer Korea, China, and possibly the Philippine Islands. The favour he showed to the Christian missionaries was suspected as arising more from political reasons than from genuine spiritual appreciation, and he did indeed wish to buy more guns and two warships from Portugal. On the other hand, he also realized the strength of the recently organized Japanese

1. Kenneth Heim, of Virginia Theological Seminary, in *The Living Church*, 24 May 1959, p. 10.

2. During this period the West was represented mainly by Spain and Portugal. The Dutch entered Oriental trade about fifty years later, and England about one hundred years later, but neither country was Roman Catholic and both refrained from evangelistic works. However, the Dutch did introduce advanced medicine, astronomy and mathematics, which the Japanese called "Ran-gaku," or "Dutch studies."

Church and rightly surmised that this strength might prove to be a great obstacle to his political ambitions if a time of conflict and opposing interests should arrive. The Jesuit fathers were not blind to the Shogun's underlying motives but, in turn, took advantage of his attitude to forward the spread of Christianity, according to their own conception of the State's connection with the Church.

Some analysis must be made of the complicated relationships between the State, trade, and evangelism of that period. With the advance of science, especially astronomy and geography, European countries were enthusiastic about the discoveries of new continents, and subsequent colonization of these distant lands. This movement, in turn, stimulated trade. Great wealth was in store for the brave merchant who dared to go to sea.

For the Roman Catholic Church, it was also a splendid opportunity to send missionaries to spread the Gospel among the heathen, made more welcome by the fact that the church was in need of new supporters. The Christian missionaries were always at the new frontiers, the merchants profited by this movement, and European countries satisfied their desire to conquer new worlds. These three groups, the Church, the merchants, and the State, were very closely co-ordinated. The Church wished to enforce her authority in the new country which had been discovered by the State and the merchants. The merchants wanted the profits of trade with the new country discovered by the State and evangelized by the Church, and at the same time to receive her spiritual care. The State was building the foundations of colonization of the new country, a development which was tied up with trade and had been prepared by the missionaries. The benefit to these three groups was mutual.

Christian evangelism was extremely successful in Japan at this time. By 1582, only thirty-three years after the beginning of organized missionary effort, there were two hundred churches built and 150,000 converts made to Christianity. This provides a sharp contrast with the later renewal of Protestant evangelism when, over a period of fifty-three years (1859–1912), Christians numbered only 79,000.

Why was early Roman Catholic evangelism so successful? In the first place, when Christianity was brought to Japan, that country was undergoing a period of domestic war and the power of traditional religion had deteriorated through its attempt to gain support from the politically powerful landlord class, and by its neglect of the suffering masses. The simplicity of Christian dogma, the strong Catholic faith in a future life and Christian eschatology appealed to the tired minds of the Japanese. Secondly, Christian charitable works, care of medical cases and relief of the suffering won the trust of the people. Thirdly, the Christian church was the only religious, organized body to appeal to the Japanese people spiritually, physically, and individually, or socially.

However, the period during which the early Christian church enjoyed prestige did not continue long. Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi suddenly issued

an edict condemning the missionaries and their teachings, ordering them to leave Japan in 1587, thirty-eight years after Xavier's landing. The persecution of the Christian church which followed was severe and brutal and it continued in varying intensity for almost three hundred years. At the end of that time, very few Christians remained.

Why did this happen? Why did Christian evangelism fail? For one thing, it was considered to be harmful to national tradition. The evangelistic tactics of the Jesuits in Japan, which included public debate with Buddhists and Shintoists, challenged the national tradition and, through it, the existing political structure. This aroused serious opposition from the government of the country. Unlike the extremely understanding and sympathetic Italian Jesuit, Valignano, the Portuguese priests, on the whole, were strongly prejudiced against Japanese culture and politics. They were especially hostile toward heathen religion. Father Cabral, who sometimes was a co-worker with Father Valignano, once claimed of the Japanese and their education: ". . . for once they [Japanese] became expert Theologians, being of a proud disposition and still young in the Faith, they would be readily prone to divide the law of Christ into heresies as numerous as the sects which their ancestors had evolved from the false doctrine of Buddha." Cabral maintained that

> it was essential for Europeans to keep the whip hand of the Japanese and to treat them as inferiors, since once their fundamentally proud, arrogant, and sensual nature was allowed to get the upper hand, they would prove quite unamenable to the discipline of their erstwhile mentors and intolerant of all restraints whether human or divine.[3]

Such opinions left little room for tolerance of native traditions.

Secondly, there was disunity among Christian bodies. Spanish Franciscans arrived in 1585 from the Philippines. In spite of the union between the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies under the sceptre of King Philip II (1580), the two colonial empires continued to be separately administered and completely independent of each other. The missionary attempts in China and Japan were handled by Portugal at first, as well as the trade, but Spain took advantage of political development and formally granted patronage to the Spanish Franciscans, entitling them to continue religious activities not only in the Philippines but also in China and Japan, the underlying thought being the extension of Spanish trade. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the Shogun of the period, was also anxious to expand his influence to the Philippine Islands and open trade with the Spanish who had conquered Luzon. He therefore gave permission to the Spanish Franciscans to work among the Japanese, in spite of the edict proclaimed the previous year. The Jesuits and Franciscans found that their conflicting policies on the evangelizing of Japan led to frustrations from time to time.

Furthermore, the thoughtless talk of Spanish traders hinted that the

3. C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 86.

traders and priests were the advance guard of expeditions which would conquer distant countries, including Japan.

Finally, in 1640, Tokugawa Shogun placed the country in tight seclusion from which it did not emerge for over two hundred years. This failure of evangelism could further be blamed upon misunderstandings and ignorance on the side both of the Church and of the Japanese state. However, perhaps one of the strongest reasons was the failure of the Japanese leaders to further their political ambitions toward Portugal or Spain through the medium of the Christian missionaries.

There is evidence that the countries of the West took advantage of the Church's favoured position to advance trade with Oriental countries. On the other hand, when the Christian missionaries were persecuted, the Western states made little effort to support them. The Church had been merely used as a bargaining point in politics, so to speak.

The Christian body of the Japanese, headed by foreign missionaries, stood against political tyranny with genuine faith in Christ. This was truly a beautiful, outstanding and impressive witness of faith. Christianity was the redemptive power through the fire of persecution of that period. It is a remarkable fact that, although outwardly the entire Christian population was eliminated, yet the faith was kept alive under cover during the two hundred years of the edict. In spite of the failure to maintain itself in Japan, Christianity showed strong evidence of genuine faith in God.

Guns and Christ were brought to Japan in the early sixteenth century. Both remained, in different ways, and with a different effect upon the nation.

II. The Second Contact with Christianity

This period began in 1859, three hundred and ten years after Xavier's landing, and lasted until 1939. The first missionary was an Episcopalian, the Reverend C. M. Williams, who began work shortly after Admiral Perry of the United States Navy successfully signed an agreement with the Japanese government to open three ports to American trade.

Admiral Perry had displayed the military (more precisely, the naval) strength of the United States to the Japanese Shogun by anchoring four steel ships in Shimoda Harbour, and had fired demonstration shots from their cannon. Half threatened and half attracted, the Japanese people recognized this new Western power. There was much indecision in Japan over Perry's proposal for trade from the three ports but progressive opinion won the battle and the nation welcomed the re-introduction of Western civilization overwhelmingly. In the eyes of the Japanese, the Western nations (represented this time by the Americans) were seen as a vigorous and adventurous people, equipped with advanced technology.

However, Mr. Williams had to face open hostility or rejection whenever he began to tell about Christ. Under the influence of the edict enforced during the past two hundred years, Christianity had been branded as a

harmful religion. The new missionary waited seven years for his first baptism and eleven for his first confirmation.

Mr. Williams, who was consecrated Bishop of Edo in 1866, proclaimed the Christian Gospel openly and publicly after the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogun, together with the edict of over two hundred years, had restored the freedom of religion. For example, he taught English, established girls' schools, hospital work and college education. When he had won the trust of the people, he was able to introduce the Christian Gospel, accompanied by Western civilization. In the period between 1859 and 1939, beginning with Bishop Williams' Episcopal mission to Japan until the Second World War, the Church made great progress in organizing and establishing its branch of the Anglican communion in Japan. This was named the Nippon Sei-ko-kwai ("Holy Catholic Church of Japan"). Bishop Williams was well-known for his saintly character, through which the people were enabled to understand Christ better.

The Episcopal Church in the United States, the Church of England (represented by the work of both S.P.G. and C.M.S.), the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Australian Church sent their missionaries and financial support generously. Bishops were appointed among these foreign missionaries, and along with mission priests governed the Church. Japanese priests were ordained and supported by foreign mission funds, but they were often under the impression that they were hired by an organization of Western missionary societies rather than acting under any indigenous authority.

There were efforts among Church leaders of all Christian denominations during that period to carry out a literal translation of established organizations of the Western Church which had originally taken centuries of history to become established. Japanese church architecture, church music, and liturgy were definitely Western. Good imitations of foreign church architecture were successfully transferred to church building in Japan in spite of the entirely different cultural backgrounds and climate of Japan and the West.

The Roman Catholic Church taught Latin anthems and sang Mass in Latin. Their church architecture was medieval in style. Converts were encouraged to memorize Latin prayers without a great deal of knowledge as to their meaning, a practice which fostered a feeling among the Japanese that their words held some magical power. Some puritans forced their converts to burn their ancestral monuments, claiming that they confused the religion. In their place, pieces of paper, upon which were written the words of Holy Scripture, were fastened to the walls of the home.

The Christian churches were the channels through which the Japanese could receive new thoughts and ideas of the West. Without making too much effort to approach and understand the people, the Church found the people came to her themselves. There was no major challenge from Buddhism or Shintoism, unless the problem involved national policy. There was little friction between two completely different cultures because Japan and her people were ready to absorb Western culture overwhelmingly. There were

few problems between the Church and State because the Church was still the minority and the State was peaceful and friendly toward the West. Christian missionary work of that period took for granted the use of Western civilization for its introduction, but it was a most charming bait to attract the Japanese people. At that stage, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this method had the greatest meaning and succeeded in speeding the spread of Christianity among the Japanese. Under the influence of nineteenth-century realism, the stress of Christian evangelism in the reformed churches was placed on Christian ethical teaching. There must be a sharp distinction between the Christian Gospel or life and ethical teachings or philosophical contemplation in any age.

It is rather strange and regrettable to observe that there was little study done on Japanese culture or character-building among Japanese Christian leaders, for most of them were too busy introducing the new European theology to meet the challenge of Oriental religion and culture. The preaching of the Church was often beyond the understanding of the general public, even though it satisfied the more sophisticated preacher. The majority of the priests and ministers of Japanese origin who were over fifty years of age had been educated and had served in this missionary church of Japan. They were brought up in the Church which was well protected, socially and financially. Then the war broke off ties with the mother churches. All foreign bishops and missionaries were forced to return to their own countries and all financial support was terminated. The administration of the Japanese Church was put into a state of confusion and suffered severely from lack of leadership and financial aid. During and after the war, the Japanese Church elected its own bishops and other authorities, while priests and native pastors took over vacancies left by the missionaries all over the country. Financially speaking, they did not get sufficient support from their congregations, chiefly because the latter were not well instructed in Christian stewardship.

During the war, the military-minded government supported the national religion, Shinto, and its worship and teaching became compulsory in the schools. The government also required all Protestant denominations to be united as one body in order that Christian power could more easily be incorporated with national policy. The Nazarene Church (an extremely evangelical denomination) was strongly opposed to Shinto worship and was forced by the government to disband its organization. The Salvation Army was another victim of pressure and it, too, was subsequently dissolved.

The Nippon Sei-ko-kwai (Anglican Communion in Japan) refused to unite with other Protestant groups merely for political convenience, although some individuals did so. Consequently, the Church was not allowed to organize itself in deaneries or dioceses. Large meetings were frowned upon and Japanese bishops were tortured in prison by the secret police. However, this persecution did much to strengthen the Anglican Church, especially within itself.

In this period of Christian evangelism in Japan, we can observe once more the recurring problems of religion and culture, and of Church and State. At the beginning of the period, Christian evangelism faced tremendous difficulties under the Shoguns' edict. However, missionary activity gradually became easier as the Japanese nation became aware of the highly civilized Western countries and grew anxious to learn from them. To Japanese minds, Christianity belongs to the West and is probably accepted as an essentially humanistic ideology from Europe. For instance, the concept of sin or the doctrine of redemption has never appeared in Oriental religion as it does in Christianity. Unfortunately, evangelism has made little effort to tackle this aspect of Oriental culture and the depth of the Oriental mind.

The main effort of evangelism by the missionaries was aimed at strongly influencing the leaders of the country, as did early Christianity in the Roman empire. It was reasoned that if the missionaries could give spiritual guidance to the royal family, and perhaps even to the Emperor himself, the whole nation would follow the example of their leaders and become converted to Christianity, as history had shown in the past. However, this had not happened during the past hundred years, partly because the national religion of Shintoism was too strong and also because there was no means of approaching the royal family. On the other hand, there was an overnight change to many Western customs—for example, the replacement of sandals by leather shoes, and of sitting upon a cushion on the floor by the use of Western furniture.

As in the earlier period, Christian missionaries were often frustrated by political developments. The Japanese state had long desired imperial expansion of the country, the adoption of new weapons such as cannon, and the establishment of a large army and navy. However, this ambition to become an imperial power was delayed at least three hundred years, while European countries were building up colonial empires with great success. Conscientious missionaries and Japanese Church leaders in the latter period were strongly opposed to imperialist state policy but the majority of Church leaders were forced to compromise with it.

The nation experienced four wars, the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), World War I (1917–18), World War II (1941–45), during this second period of contact with Christianity. Meeting national crises solidified the unity of the nation and offered opportunities to nourish nationalism.

During the period of the first Sino-Japanese War, the Church did not experience much difficulty with the State because the number of Christians was very small, but it was obvious that the Church opposed State policy during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–05. Uchimura Kanzo, the leader of the Mu-Kyo-Kwai (non-denominational church) was openly against the war. He wrote articles in the newspaper, or for his own Church periodical, about his Christian anti-war convictions. He was highly educated and an influential man among the intellectuals of that time. Another church

leader who strove for peace was the Bishop Nicholas of the Russian Orthodox Church who, when he was asked by a Japanese patriot whether he would pray God for victory to his own country or victory for Japan which he was working to evangelize, made the truly Christian answer that a Japanese Christian might pray for the victory of Japan but that he himself would pray for the early cessation of war.

In World War I, Japan signed a treaty with England engaging herself in war but her duties were minor, consisting mainly of patrolling with the Allies' merchant freighters in the Indian Ocean, or even as far as the Mediterranean. Enormous exports of war supplies and merchandise helped Japanese business to gain glorious prosperity for the nation, but the people could not realize the serious nature of the problem. The circumstances were of the "fire-on-the-other-side-of-the-river" variety; that is to say, the incident was taking place at a spot too distant to cause immediate concern. Christian leaders also failed to take direct responsibility for dealing with the ethical issues of the war.

At the time of World War II, many Christian leaders spoke openly against militarism and state policy, thereby losing their social standing and being persecuted, directly or indirectly. The Japanese churches were unable to organize to act as a whole in protest against national policy. The relationship between Church and State was not a happy one because the Church was still too young to claim a recognized position in the nation. They were compelled to maintain themselves without any assistance in keeping their own faith.

III. After World War II

When the war ceased in 1945, it was remarkable that every single Japanese church was crowded with people eager to hear the Gospel. This was the third upsurge of Christianity in Japan.

General MacArthur's successful peace treaty with the Japanese government opened the new age of atomic energy. The Japanese were again fearful and yet eager to know more about the Western power which produced the atomic bomb. They hoped to find the real spiritual backbone of the West through the Church. This was obviously the wrong attitude with which to approach the Church but they did not see the distinction between religion and policy, or Christianity and civilization. Christian leaders failed to observe closely this reaction of the masses, and to take this opportunity to spread in their minds the desire to lead the life of Christ. The majority of Christian leaders reverted to the familiar techniques of their missionary period for spreading the Christian gospel, such as English Bible classes, English conversation classes, Sunday schools, and the teaching of Christian ethics.

However, this was not enough to meet the needs of the victims of disaster. It was with great regret that Japanese Church leaders faced and realized the fact that their teachings were not ready to cope with the spiritual

crisis of the nation immediately after World War II. While the Communists were working and fighting to provide bread for the poor on a vast scale, Christian charities were insufficient to give any great competition.

The Japanese imperial hierarchy prior to World War II might be compared to the apex of a pyramid. The first aim of the Church, of course, was to hit the top of the pyramid, that is to say, to convert the Emperor and the royal family to Christianity. In actual fact, the Church hit the lower part of the pyramid. She spent enermous energy and patience to convert educated intellectuals to Christianity and, through them, she widely influenced the nation.

With the American army of occupation came the introduction of democracy, with an epoch-making change in the educational system and its curriculum. The emphasis on the rights of the people went to extremes. The masses had more and more to say about politics, as well as other matters, until the people began to believe that they were always in the right. This development has forced a change in the Christian strategy of evangelism. The governing power of the nation is dropping from the leaders, who are in the minority, to the broader base of the pyramid, the mass of the people.

When the Church is compelled to face the lower part of the pyramid, she must be aware that it consists of the harder, more conservative element, people who still cling to their old religion, way of thinking and way of living. This in turn brings into focus the urgent problem of the differences of culture and religion between the Oriental and the Occidental. If Christianity wishes to be regarded as a Western religion and wishes to remain Western, there will be very little opportunity to spread in the coming Japan. If the Christian Church would like to become established as a national institution, she must revert to the basic Christian faith, which is more primitive, flexible and dynamic, enabling it to proceed through the Oriental culture barrier.

A new Research Bureau of Evangelism has been organized in the Japanese Christian Council of Churches. It is encouraging to note that a few scholars have already begun surveys of this difficult and yet important problem of relationships between the State and Church, Culture and Religion. I am firmly convinced that they will come forth with clear reasons for the factors which hold back the further progress of Christian evangelism, thereby greatly benefiting the planning of the future evangelism of Japan. Above all, it will have to be made clear that Christianity is not only a teaching of the high morals of the West, but that it is the revelation of God's character and of the force which alone can redeem mankind throughout the world.