

# Articles



**THE JAPANESE FEAR OF CHRISTIANITY AND EUROPEAN  
NATIONALISM IN THE DIPLOMACY OF COMMODORE  
MATTHEW C. PERRY**

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The United States ship, *Preble*, under the command of James Glynn (1800?-1871), was in the China seas in February 1849 as part of a large squadron of American ships that was patrolling Asian waters. While off the island of Batavia, Commander Glynn received information that sixteen American seamen, who had been shipwrecked not far from the coast of Japan, were under detention and were being treated with great cruelty. The Americans, already detained for seventeen months by the Japanese when Glynn received word of their capture, had been made to trample on a crucifix (*fumie*).<sup>1</sup> The Japanese guards told the American prisoners that the figure on the crucifix was the “devil of Japan,” and that if they refused to step on it, they would be executed. The incident was resolved favorably for the Americans, Commander Glynn eventually being able to negotiate the release of the seamen.

This incident took place three years before Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794-1858) set sail from the United States in 1852 to negotiate trade and diplomatic relations with Japan. It shows that even as late as the 1850s the Japanese were still using pictures of Christian figures to identify adherents of Christianity, a practice that had begun in the 1620s. Suspects were ordered to step on Christian images on the assumption that those who refused or hesitated would reveal themselves to be Christians. The practice was rarely used after the 1660s, and an inquisitor for the office of religious inquisition (*shumon aratame yaku*) was never appointed by the shogunate after 1792, but inquisition by *fumie* continued until 1857 when, under the terms of an agreement negotiated by the Dutch, the Japanese government (*bakufu*) abolished the practice of trampling upon a sacred image. American seamen were among the last to be victimized by the *fumie*

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<sup>1</sup> Francis L. Hawks, ed., Commodore M.C. Perry, *Narrative of the Expedition to the China Seas and Japan, 1852-1854* (Washington: Beverley Tucker, Senate Printer, 1856), p. 48.

ceremony, but Christianity could still not be legally propagated or practiced in Japan in 1857, nor could Christian literature or pictures be imported.<sup>2</sup>

The harassment of American seamen by use of the *fumie* is a reminder that, even though Christianity had been almost totally stamped out two hundred years earlier, the fear of Christianity still remained. The foreign religion was still considered a threat to the peace and well-being of Japan, and the same methods were still being used to root out any vestiges of its influence. When Perry arrived at Uraga in 1853, Christianity was considered a curse, and the fear of punishment for having even the most tenuous connection with the “evil sect” was common.

Peoples’ dread of Christianity was not based simply on their fear of punishment by the *bakufu*. The superstitious view of the foreign religion is well illustrated by an incident that has been related by an officer on Perry’s flagship. The American officer asked a Japanese visitor who had come aboard the ship to write his autograph in Japanese on the fly-leaf of his book. The book which the seaman held out to him was a Christian prayer book, and when the Japanese guest, with his brush poised to sign his name, saw a Christian cross on the title page, he immediately threw the book down and would not even touch it.<sup>3</sup>

In his negotiations, Perry had to take into account the trepidation with which the Japanese viewed Christianity. He displayed great skill as a diplomat and set in motion the process of putting to rest the concerns that the Japanese had with regard to possible foreign interference, especially the intrusion of foreign missionaries. Perry was well aware that lurking behind the negotiations was a long, unfortunate history of Japanese dealings with Christianity and of Japanese worries about how to contain it in the future. Perry was careful to make it clear that his government had no intention of forcing Christianity on the Japanese and making the same “mistake” that the Portuguese had made three hundred years earlier. In his letter of 7 July 1853 to the “Emperor”<sup>4</sup> Perry writes:

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<sup>2</sup> George Sansom, *Western World and Japan: A Study in the Interaction of European and Asiatic Cultures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 488.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>4</sup> The letter found its way to the thirteenth Tokugawa shogun, Iesada (1824-1858, r. 1853-1858), who followed Ieyoshi (1793-1853, r. 1837-1853). Perry’s *Narrative of the Expedition to the China Seas* (p. 11) points out that

[I am] commanded to explain to the Japanese that the United States are connected with no government in Europe, and that their laws do not interfere with the religion of their own citizens, much less with that of other nations.<sup>5</sup>

Perry was well aware of the history of Japanese relations with European countries in the sixteenth century and with the Japanese edicts that forbade Christianity (*kinkyōrei*) at that time. The commodore seemed to understand the Japanese position, and in spite of the history of persecution it was his conviction that the Japanese had always been historically tolerant of other religions and would have been tolerant of Christianity if circumstances had been different. Perry believed that it was the Portuguese and the Spaniards that had turned the Japanese against both Christianity and the West. It was, in fact, Western intolerance, in his view, and not Japanese intolerance that had forced the Japanese to sever ties with the European nations, except for the Dutch. In the *Narrative of the Expedition to the China Seas and Japan 1852-1854* Perry writes,<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, no feature is more striking among the institutions of the [Japanese] Empire than its enlarged spirit of religious toleration. It was extended to Christianity on its first promulgation by the Portuguese; and was not withdrawn until the Japanese supposed that intolerance and treason lurked under the new religion. Christianity was driven from Japan on political not religious grounds....The truth is, that the Japanese government exhibits now, as it always has done, a very remarkable indifference to mere

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“Japan presents the singular feature of having two Emperors at the same time, the one secular, the other ecclesiastical...”

<sup>5</sup> Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition*, p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> The *Narrative* is actually compiled by an editor who gathered pages from Perry's own journal as well as from the reports of several of Perry's officers. In the *Preferatory Note*, Perry writes: “The *Narrative* here presented...has been prepared under my supervision from materials furnished by me and is authentic. I present it as my official report, and am alone responsible for the statement of facts it contains.”

doctrinal points, so long as they interfere not with the public tranquility.<sup>7</sup>

Perry gives sound reasons for his views and does not seem to be influenced by a solely anti-Catholic or anti-European bias. He cited his belief that there were a large number of religions in Japan in the seventeenth century that were able to flourish unmolested, though they were quite distinct from Buddhism. Christianity had been one among the “large number of religions” and had prospered at first. Perry explains how quarrels among the Roman Catholic religious orders were one cause, if not the primary cause, of the expulsion of Christianity from Japan.

Had the work begun by [Francis] Xavier [1506-1552] and his companions been left in the hands of men like themselves, we very much doubt whether the severe Japanese laws prohibiting Christianity in the Empire would ever have existed. But these prudent, inoffensive, and laborious men were soon outnumbered by swarms of Dominican, Augustinian, and Franciscan friars from Goa and Macao, who were attracted by the flattering accounts of the remarkable success of the Jesuits. They had not labored in making the harvest, yet they were ready enough to go and reap it.<sup>8</sup>

Perry cites as a more immediate cause of the persecution an incident that occurred in 1596:

A Portuguese bishop was met on the high road by one of the highest officers of the State on his way to court. Each was in his sedan. The usage of the country required that, in such case, the conveyance of the bishop should be stopped, and that he should alight and pay his respects to the nobleman. Instead of conforming to this established act of courtesy, the bishop took not the least notice of the Japanese dignitary but, turning his head away from him, ordered his carriers to carry him on. The insult, evidently

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<sup>7</sup> Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

intended, was so gross that the grandee took mortal offence...and presented his grievances to the emperor.<sup>9</sup>

The arrogance of the Portuguese was not only manifest in what might be considered this “minor” insult to a Japanese nobleman. Perry was convinced that the Portuguese had solicited the help of Japanese Christians in their plans to overthrow the government of Japan. In order to back up his suspicions, Perry gives an account of a Portuguese ship on its way from Asia back to Lisbon that was captured by the Dutch. On board was found a letter, written by a certain “Moro,” a native Japanese, to the King of Portugal. In the letter Moro reveals himself to be a devout Catholic, a warm friend of the Jesuits, and one of the chief agents and friends of the Portuguese in Japan. From the letter it appears that the Japanese Christians, in conjunction with the Portuguese, were plotting the overthrow of the shogunate. The Christians seemed to be requesting aid, in the form of ships and soldiers, from Portugal. “It may be difficult to ascertain with certainty all the details of the conspiracy,” the *Narrative* relates, “but of the conspiracy itself there can be no doubt.”<sup>10</sup> Though this account is second hand, Perry himself was convinced that it was proof of a Portuguese/Christian conspiracy against Japan. As he was negotiating with the Japanese, he wanted by all means to distance himself from any suspicion of being involved in similar plots.

Given the history of Japanese-Western relations in the sixteenth century, it is not surprising that the Japanese would be hesitant and suspicious of Perry’s intentions. The chaplain on Perry’s expedition, with whom the commodore regularly consulted, Mr. Jones, expressed his belief that the unfortunate experience that the Japanese had had with Christianity was now part of the past and would no longer be a reason for them to reject trade and diplomatic relations with the United States. In the chaplain’s words:

I performed funeral services on shore four times: once at Yokohama, twice at Hakodate, and once at Shimoda; in every instance in the presence of the Japanese...they always behaved well. Japanese officers were present. I thus became known among

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

the people everywhere as a Christian clergyman....Instead of this producing a shrinking from me, as I had supposed it would, I found that I had decidedly gained by it in their respect, and this among officials as well as commoners....There was no seeming aversion to me because I was a minister of Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Jones acknowledges, however, that there was another side to the impression he had received at these funeral services. The government of Japan was, in his view, “exceedingly jealous about our religion, but the cause of this jealousy was the Japanese’s confusing the difference between ‘the Romanists’ and ‘ourselves.’”<sup>12</sup> He was convinced that after that misunderstanding was resolved there would be no difficulty with bringing Christianity into Japan. After discussing this matter with the chaplain, Perry was confident that he could convince the Japanese that his intentions and the policies of his government would be different from those of the Europeans of the past. The letter which Perry carried to the “emperor” from President Fillmore stated:

The Constitution and laws of the United States forbid all interference with the religious or political concerns of other nations. I have particularly charged Commodore Perry to abstain from every act which could possibly disturb the tranquility of your imperial majesty’s dominions.<sup>13</sup>

Perry understood that it was not only the Portuguese and Spaniards who had set back the cause of Japanese-Western relations. The British were at fault as well and could easily jeopardize his sensitive negotiations. Looking back at the recent history of Japanese-British relations, Perry considered the impact that the incident of the armed warship, HMS *Phaeton*, had had on the Japanese in 1808. The British ship appeared in Nagasaki harbor flying the Dutch flag in order to intercept Dutch traders. Japanese authorities were infuriated that the British had perpetrated this deception. As a result, ships that arrived from Britain in 1816, 1822, and 1849 were not welcomed by the Japanese. The *Gaikokusen uchiharai rei*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 256.



(Order for the repelling of foreign ships) had been promulgated in 1825 because of the understandable anxiety over the foreigners. The shogunate, however, revoked the *uchiharai* order in 1842 and replaced it with the *Shinsui kyoyo rei* (Order for the provision of firewood and water). This newer decree, which Perry took as an indication of Japan's good will, directed that foreign ships be provided with food, water, and other necessities, on condition that they leave Japan immediately after. Perry considered this final condition to be a defensive measure and not a sign of Japan wanting to close itself off from the rest of the world. Once the suspicions were gone, Perry found the Japanese extremely open.

On the morning of 15 July 1853 Perry dispatched a surveying party to the shore. "people greeted the boats with every indication of welcome," Perry writes,

There were a few government boats lying near, and the officers on board gladly welcomed our people to a visit, in the course of which such a mutual friendliness sprung up that the Americans joined the Japanese in a social pipe or two of tobacco.<sup>14</sup>

Perry had the impression from his own experiences and those of his crew that the Japanese were cautious, but curious and open.

#### **Japan: A "Closed Country"?**

In the *Narrative*, Perry does not refer explicitly to a policy "Japanese isolation." A reader of the *Narrative's* descriptions of both the failures and successes in the long history of Japanese-European relations would not think of Japan as having been closed or isolated from the West in the manner that has sometimes been asserted. The visits of the Dutch had long provided the Japanese with books about Europe that far exceeded the amount of information Europeans acquired about Japan. The *bakufu* also received information from the Dutch through the regular reports (*fūsetsugaki*), which they were required to submit, on what was happening in the "outside" world.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge of Western art, science, medicine, philosophy and other disciplines was available to Dutch studies (*rangaku*)

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>15</sup> Marius B. Jansen, "Rangaku and Westernization," *Modern Asian Studies* 18/4 (1984), p. 541.

and Western studies (*yōgaku*) scholars in Japan. Perry's *Narrative* is a reminder of the Japanese interest in the Western sciences, mathematics, and culture in general – an interest which the Europeans had encouraged.<sup>16</sup>

Surprisingly, the Japanese word for “closed country” (*sakoku*), which has commonly been used to describe Japan's political condition during and after the Christian persecutions at the turn of the seventeenth century, was not coined until 1801. Tadao Shizuki (1760-1806), a Dutch translator in Nagasaki, was ordered by the authorities to translate Englebert Kaempfer's (1651-1716) defense of the “closed country” system which appears in a chapter of the Dutch writer's *Amoenitates* (1712).<sup>17</sup> The rather cumbersome title of the chapter is: “An Enquiry Whether It Be Conducive for the Good of the Japanese Empire to Keep It Shut Up, As It Now Is, and Not to Suffer Its Inhabitants to Have Any Commerce with Foreign Nations Either At Home or Abroad.” The chapter summarizes the European conception, rather than the *bakufu*'s policy, of Japan's isolation. In this essay, Kaempfer presented two sides of the argument on whether the “isolation” of Japan should continue. He asserted, on the one hand that “closure of a country to the rest of mankind was surely against the will of God, who created a world without boundaries.” Kaempfer states that though Japan had already “emerged from its Warring States Period, Europe had so far failed to do so. This essay, written by a European, was to become an important document in the internal debate in Japan on whether to permit the foreigners access to its port cities.”<sup>18</sup> Kaempfer's concept of a “closed country” is the conception of Japan that has been held in the West throughout much of the twentieth century. Thus, the term “*sakoku*” is actually a Western influence and translates a Western perception about Japan rather than actual Tokugawa policy.

From Perry's perspective it was Europe and the United States that were isolated from Japan as much as Japan was isolated from Europe and the United States. Though Perry's voyage has been viewed as “the opening” of Japan, Japan had long been open to Europe through the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and explorers of other nations. Even after the expulsion

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<sup>16</sup> Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Jansen, “Rangaku and Westernization,” p. 541.

<sup>18</sup> Englebert Kaempfer, *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*, ed. Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 19.

edicts, Japanese scholars were concerned and interested in Japan's relations with the West, Perry tried to acquire an accurate understanding of Japan's past relations with the West. His conclusion is recorded in the *Narratives*:

the exclusive system of Japan was not the result of any national idiosyncrasy, but was caused by peculiar circumstances, long since passed and was, in fact, in direct opposition to what history proved to be the natural temperament and disposition of the Japanese people.<sup>19</sup>

Perry found that the responsibility for the Western nations' inability to break down the barriers that kept them out did not lie with Japan but with the Westerners themselves:

Peculiar circumstances in the then political condition of the power seeking admission; the rivalry of different nations striving to thwart each other; the indiscretion, not to say arrogance, of some of those entrusted with the mission, who sought to bully a brave people into acquiescence with their wishes; a misconception of the true character of the Japanese.<sup>20</sup>

According to Perry, in the nineteenth century it was the Dutch, not the Japanese who wanted Japan kept closed. "The Dutch wanted to commit the Japanese to agree to no treaty with any foreign power but such as they prescribed."<sup>21</sup>

### **Changing Japanese Attitudes and Ideas about Christianity**

Japanese discourse on the "problem" of Christianity clearly shows that intellectuals in Japan were not isolated from or ignorant of the foreign religion. Throughout the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), but particularly during the years just prior to Perry's arrival, the dangers and benefits of Christianity were discussed among Mito scholars. The attitude of the Japanese toward Christianity when Perry arrived seems to be one of fear

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<sup>19</sup> Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

and suspicion on the one hand, along with respect and admiration on the other.

Maeno Ryōtaku (1723-1803), a doctor of Dutch medicine who studied Christianity and its potential impact on Japan represented a number of Mito scholars who had, what perhaps awkwardly would be described as a “not unfavorable” view of Christianity. Seeing that Western nations were concerned with the welfare of the commoners in their lands, Maeno concluded that the essence of government in North America and Europe was social concern for the people, and this concern was a direct result of Christian influence. In his understanding, Western nations were governed by officials who were invested with religious authority in order to carry out religious, that is, Christian works of charity. The unity of government and religion in the West enabled officials to rule wisely. Maeno concluded that in a strong nation religion had to be inseparable from government, and the implementation of religious teachings is, or should be, the responsibility of the ruler of the state,

Christianity, the state religion of Holland, and the teaching of Africa...all have the same aim: to save and nurture widowers, widows, orphans, single persons, the sick and disabled, and the destitute and suffering and to base edification and government on this policy.<sup>22</sup>

Maeno was not a Christian himself, and was opposed to bringing Christianity into Japan, but he judged that the religious teaching of the “Western sages,” that is, of Western government officials, was a teaching that had proven to be an instrument of effective government policy. The proof of this for Maeno lay in the fact that Christianity had spread over far more of the globe than any other religious teaching and would continue to do so.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to gauge the direct impact of Maeno’s ideas on other Tokugawa thinkers, but Fujita Yūkoku (1774-1826) was certainly aware that Europeans were spreading Christian teachings in the territories they colonized. The fear that the same thing would happen in Japan affected him profoundly. He learned of Maeno’s vision of a Christian-dominated world,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

and the fears that Fujita held for Japan were intensified when he learned of Russian proselytizing and colonizing in the north.<sup>24</sup>

Should the Russian barbarians entice our stupid commoners with their wicked [Christian] teachings and sugar-sweet words, we will suffer the same fate as Chou, the wicked last ruler of the Shang.<sup>25</sup>

Aizawa Seishisai (1782-1863), Yūkoko's student, was certainly familiar with Maeno's work<sup>26</sup> and saw Christianity as a powerful tool for government. Christianity was the means that Western rulers used to achieve *jinwa*, or unity and integration of the people. It was *jinwa*, in Aizawa's opinion, that was the key to the national strength, wealth, and expansion of any nation. He conceived of *kokutai* (national polity) largely out of a desire to bring to Japan the same kind of popular unity and integration that, he believed, characterized nations in the West. Aizawa, in concert with Maeno's philosophy, thought that it was Christianity that had inspired Western governments to achieve *jinwa*.<sup>27</sup>

Aizawa not only admired the West, he also feared it and looked on Western nations with deep suspicions. Throughout his life he believed that trade and Christianity were stratagems intended to facilitate a Western takeover of Japan. In *Shinron* (New thesis, 1825), he seems to echo Maeno's thought arguing that the secret of Western strength lies in Christianity. He calls the foreign religion a state cult that Western leaders propagate in order to cultivate voluntary allegiance both in their own peoples and in those they colonize overseas.<sup>28</sup> Aizawa's words almost seem to be a warning given to prepare the next generation of Japanese leaders to meet Perry.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel B. Griffith, trans., *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan: The New Theses of 1825* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

For close to three hundred years now the Western Barbarians have rampaged on the high seas. Why are they able to enlarge their territories and fulfill their every desire? Does their wisdom and courage exceed that of ordinary men? Is their government so benevolent that they win popular support?...Do they possess some superhuman, divine powers? Hardly. Christianity is the sole key to their success. It is a truly evil and base religion, barely worth discussing. But its main doctrines are simple to grasp and well-contrived; they can easily deceive stupid commoners with it....Once beguiled by Christianity, they cannot be brought back to their senses. Herein lies the secret of the barbarians' success.<sup>29</sup>

Aizawa did not have a fondness for Christianity, nor was he sympathetic toward it. In fact, he viewed Christianity as a hideous religion. More importantly, however, he was in awe of its seeming influence and vitality. For him, it was a belief system that had the power to take over countries and topple governments. He cautioned the *bakufu* that the Westerners who came to Japan did so to trade in order to learn about the country's geography and to test the nation's defenses. Westerners would then bring Christianity as a prelude to conquest:

They [the Western nations] propagate Christianity to subvert it [i.e. Japan] from within. Once our peoples' hearts and minds are captivated by Christianity, they will greet the barbarian host with open arms, and we would be powerless to stop them.<sup>30</sup>

Like Aizawa and Fujita, other Mito scholars portrayed Westerners as rapacious barbarians intent on capturing the hearts and minds of "stupid" Japanese commoners. They were convinced that commoners could be easily converted to Christianity and induced to forsake their rulers.<sup>31</sup> For Fujita Tōko (1806-1855), the West had always harbored aggressive designs on Japan. The Christianity (*kirishitan*) that had been propagated by the Jesuits during the first encounter with the West (1549-1639) had been an opening step toward conquest. Fortunately, that first step had been averted, but there

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

was no guarantee the Japanese would be as fortunate the second time. These scholars saw that the loyalty of the Japanese *kirishitan* to his object of worship – “the body crucified on the cross” – had taken precedence over his loyalty to his feudal lord, the very keystone of Tokugawa society. One of the arguments they leveled against the opening of trade relations with the United States in 1853 was that broadened intercourse with the West would enable the Westerners to propagate the “Evil Religion” and compromise the loyalty of the people.<sup>32</sup>

A different perspective on the “Christian problem” was offered by Yokoi Shōnan (1809-1869). A low-ranking samurai, Yokoi began to express his thoughts on Christianity in the 1850s, just as Perry was involved in his negotiations.<sup>33</sup> He made a distinction, which the Mito scholars had failed to make, between the Christianity of the sixteenth century; that is, the *kirishitan* religion brought by the Spanish and the Portuguese, and contemporary Christianity. Yokoi did not believe that they were the same religion at all. Contemporary Christianity was not a threat to Japan in the same way that the *kirishitan* religion had been. He rejected the notion, held by Aizawa and Fujita Tōko, that Christianity would weaken the Confucian virtue of loyalty to one’s lord. In 1856 he wrote to a friend:

it appears that so-called Christianity is in harmony with both the will of heaven and the principle of nature...In countries where this religion is believed there prevails a closeness among the people, from the ruler above down to the lowest commoner. The great virtues of loyalty to the sovereign and filial piety are practiced. The people do not act out of greed...there is a world of difference between Christianity and the *kirishitan* accepted at the time of Ōtomo [Yoshishige, 1530-1587].<sup>34</sup>

Like some Mito scholars, Yokoi believed that Christianity nurtured the benevolence of the Western governments toward their people, and that it

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<sup>32</sup> Richard T. Chang, “Yokoi Shōnan’s View of Christianity,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 21/3-4 (1966), p. 267.

<sup>33</sup> *Yokoi Shōnan den* [The Life of Yokoi Shōnan], 1942; and *Yokoi Shōnan ikō* [Manuscripts Left by Yokoi Shōnan], 1942.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, “Yokoi Shōnan’s View of Christianity,” pp. 266-272.

was consistent with Confucian virtue. Christianity also brought development for western countries and growth around the globe.

Yokoi was the *bakufu* representative who negotiated with Townsend Harris (1804-1878), the American Consul general who in 1858 succeeded in having the Tokugawa *bakufu* sign the first commercial treaty between Japan and a western power. From those negotiations, Yokoi gained the understanding, which had been lacking to his predecessors, that in the West there existed a sharp distinction between the political and the ecclesiastical authorities. Since there was a distinction between political and religious interests, Yokoi thought that the Japanese side would be able to successfully argue that Christian missionaries ought to be barred from coming into Japan. Harris, however, informed Yokoi that Christians spread their teachings under the auspices of their respective denominations, and that his government did not have the authority to prevent missionaries from entering Japan. Yokoi accepted this and was resigned to the eventual arrival of foreign missionaries. He believed that Christianity was not the threat that the Mito scholars had considered it to be. In 1864 Yokoi stated to Inoue Kowashi (1843-1895), minister of education from 1893:

In the past all that Christianity did was teach the ignorant masses. It was a shallow religion. But lately even in the West the government officials do not necessarily believe in Jesus. Rather they have developed disciplines capable of assisting government and science and thereby have benefited greatly from these disciplines. This conforms to the action of the sages.<sup>35</sup>

Many of his Japanese contemporaries believed Yokoi to be a Christian and thought that he looked forward to the spread of Christianity in Japan. Although untrue, it was because of this mistaken assumption that he became the first important leader of the Meiji government to be assassinated. Yokoi was tolerant of Christianity and saw it as a valid ethical system. He was not a Christian advocate, however, and viewed it as inferior to true Confucianism. Christianity was only a dilution of the true Way of the ancient sages, while true Confucianism was a complete embodiment of the Way.

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<sup>35</sup> *Yokoi Shōnan ikō*, p. 903.



### **Christianity and European Nationalism**

The year that Yokoi Shōnan was assassinated, Guido Verbeck, a missionary of the Dutch Reformed Church in America, arrived in Japan as one of the first Christian missionaries of the Meiji period. Describing his missionary experiences, Verbeck reported that whenever he would bring up the topic of religion, he was immediately warned to drop the subject. “The hand [of the Japanese person with whom I spoke] would almost involuntarily be applied to his throat [in a gesture of cutting] to indicate the extreme peril of such a topic.<sup>36</sup> Verbeck reported that Japanese servants in his and in other missionary households were in constant fear of spies who would report any contact with Christianity.

French Catholic missionaries of the French Foreign Mission Society (Société des Missions Etrangères) arrived in Japan a year after Perry. Mermet de Cachon (1828-1879) and Abbé Girard, the first French missionaries to come to Japan, arrived in 1855 with Baron Jean-Baptiste Louis Gros, who would sign France’s first treaty of commerce and friendship with Japan. Under the terms of the treaty French subjects would have freedom of religion and were allowed to build churches and establish cemeteries within the treaty ports, but the Japanese made it clear that the terms of the treaty did not allow missionaries to go outside the treaty ports. For two years the French missionaries kept to the terms of the agreement. Girard remained in Yokohama; Mermet taught French in Hakodate; and another missionary, Bernard Petitjean, who came to Japan from the Ryukyus in 1862, worked in Nagasaki.

Girard established a chapel in Yokohama and began to preach in Japanese. One day in 1862 a group of peasants, merchants, and even samurai wandered into his chapel, simply out of curiosity, and listened for a while to Girard’s sermon. Thirty-six Japanese who were in the chapel at the time were subsequently arrested. The French diplomatic mission learned that the *bakufu* intended to execute those who had heard Girard’s sermon. Eventually, the *bakufu* agreed that if Girard ceased preaching in Japanese the executions would not be carried out. Realizing that as long as the political situation in Japan remained unchanged, Christianity would make no headway, Girard insisted that France take a strong stand. He appealed to the French diplomatic mission, saying it would be to France’s advantage and to future trade relations to push the Japanese into an acceptance of

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<sup>36</sup> Sansom, *Western World and Japan*, p. 468.

Christianity. Girard had played into old Japanese fears and the prediction of Aizawa that the West would use trade as a prelude to the propagation of Christianity.

Relations between Japan and the West began to get worse rather than better. The same year (1862) the English merchant, Charles Richardson was attacked by retainers of Shimazu Hisamitsu, daimyo of Satsuma (now Kagoshima Prefecture), in the village of Namamugi near Yokohama. Chōshū batteries were firing on American and French ships in the Shimonoseki straits, and the bombardment of Kagoshima by the British fleet followed in 1863 and 1864. Seeing such incidents, both Petitjean and Girard were of the opinion that the West should punish Japan. In a letter to a friend, dated 14 April 1863, Petitjean wrote in reference to the past Japanese persecution of Christianity:

Despite an impunity of more than two centuries, Japan has a great debt to repay God for the torrents of Christian bloodshed in the seventeenth century. Who knows whether the hour of punishment is not about to arrive!!<sup>37</sup>

In February 1865 the Catholic Church at Oura in Nagasaki was consecrated to the Twenty-Six Martyrs, and the following month, Petitjean, as he was standing near the entrance to the church, was approached by a small group of Japanese who questioned him about his mission. After receiving Petitjean's assurance that he was obedient to the authority of the Pope of Rome, that he venerated the Blessed Virgin, and that the clergy of his church were celibate, the Japanese told him that they were of the same faith. The missionaries had always suspected, or at the very least had hoped, that descendants of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christians might still exist somewhere; and this meeting was the proof for which they had been waiting for so long.<sup>38</sup> Petitjean learned that there were thousands of other Christians in hiding and quickly informed his colleagues. In their enthusiasm for having found these hidden Christians, the French

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<sup>37</sup> J.B. Chaillet, *Monseigneur Petitjean (1829-1844) et la Résurrection Catholique du Japon au XIXe Siècle* (Montceau, 1919), p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Pierre Lehmann, "French Catholic Missionaries in Japan in the Bakumatsu and Early Meiji Periods," *Modern Asian Studies* 13/3 (1979), p. 384.

missionaries completely disregarded the treaties, traveling and preaching in areas outside of the treaty port limits.

By June 1866 the newly-assigned head of the French legation, Léon Roches (1808-1901), began working to mend relations with the Japanese, and it appeared that he would eventually be able to gain the trust of the *bakufu*. When Petitjean visited Roches, the diplomat promised him that the Japanese government might be reasonably well disposed towards Christians when the political situation improved.<sup>39</sup> The situation, however, did not improve.

A missionary at a special inaugural Mass in Nagasaki on 2 June 1866 announced to the congregation how France was “trebly represented at the Mass in Her religious force, in her civilizing power, and in her martial valor, by a bishop, by a minister plenipotentiary, and by an admiral.”<sup>40</sup> Understandably, the Japanese extrapolated from the missionary’s address that the religious, political, and military authorities of Western nations must be inseparable. No doubt, they were inseparable in the minds of the French missionaries and diplomats as well. This nationalistic frame of mind prevented the Japanese from becoming more favorably disposed toward Christianity.

During the following year (1867) the ban against Christianity continued to be strictly enforced, and some Christians in the Urakami area of Nagasaki, who had attended sermons and services, were imprisoned. Technically, the arrests were not in violation of the treaties. The Japanese agreements with the Western nations specifically forbade missionaries to proselytize outside the port cities, and religious activities were supposed to be limited to the missionaries’ own compatriots. The Japanese had been aware of the illegal activities of the Western missionaries for some time; but even if they had enforced the literal terms of the agreements and arrested the missionaries, the Japanese officials would have had no alternative except to hand the prisoners back to their consular authorities. All Westerners in Japan, the missionaries included, enjoyed the protection of extraterritoriality. Although the missionaries were breaking the laws of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

<sup>40</sup> F. Marnas, *La Religion de Jésus Ressuscitée au Japon Dans La Seconde Moitié du XIXe Siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris-Lyon: Delhomme et Briguët, 1897), p. 672.

Japan and acting contrary to the stipulations of the treaties that their own countries had signed, they were immune from punishment.

Frustrated in their attempts to make the foreign missionaries respect the terms of the treaties, the Japanese authorities turned their anger against the native Christians. Roches tried to intervene with the Japanese government on behalf of the Christians arrested at Urakami. The *Rōjū* (council of elders) promised to release the Christians if they would not practice their religion openly. At this show of good will on the part of the Japanese, Roches, supported by the British representative, Sir Harry Parkes (1828-1885), urged Petitjean to show good faith as well, to obey the treaty stipulations and not travel or preach outside of the treaty ports. In a long letter to Roches, Petitjean refuted the appeals for moderation and insisted that their mission could not be constrained by the laws of men, as it was directed by the law of God. "The missionaries," claimed Petitjean, "are the glory of France and in the eyes of God the persecutors should answer for their crimes."<sup>41</sup> In 1872 and 1873 the pressure of the Western powers came down hard on Japan and resulted in the French *chargé d'affaires*, Paul de Tureene, reporting to Paris that the Japanese Government would abrogate the edicts against Christianity and release arrested Christians.

The missionaries viewed the lifting of the ban as a victory for France as much as for Christianity. The French identification of religion with nationality, which was passed on to their Japanese converts, is illustrated by the case of a young Christian samurai who was baptized in May 1873 and fell seriously ill shortly after his baptism. Unable either to speak or to write, he made a sign to a fellow Christian who was assisting him to hold his hand so that he could write. It is reported that he wrote two Japanese characters: "God" and "France." He died clutching the paper in his hand.<sup>42</sup> The missionaries who were with him as he lay dying saw this as a sign of his love for the faith and for France. There is, of course, clear ambiguity in their interpretation of the event. The Chinese character for France (*futsu*) is the same as the character for Buddha (*butsu*); and the character for "God" is the same as the character for "the [Shinto] gods." The term *shinbutsu*, which the dying Christian wrote, could very well mean "the gods and the Buddhas" or "Shinto and Buddhism." Rather than professing his love for God and for France, the samurai youth may have actually

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<sup>41</sup> Lehman, "French Catholic Missionaries," p. 386.

<sup>42</sup> Chaillet, *Monseigneur Petitjean*, p. 333.

renounced his new faith and reclaimed his belief in Buddha and in the traditional Japanese deities.<sup>43</sup>

To what extent the Japanese authorities and the Japanese people realized the close link that Christian missionaries established between their religion and their country is difficult to ascertain. The missionaries seemed incapable of distinguishing between the apostolic mission and their nationalism. This was the same mistake that many Spanish and Portuguese missionaries had made in the sixteenth century. American and British protestant missionaries were not entirely free of this mindset either. Perry's efforts to keep trade and religion separate provided an early model for negotiation and diplomacy with the Japanese. To the detriment of Christianity, however, his model was not followed.

Perry's successful diplomacy had gained the trust and understanding of the Japanese; but his efforts seem to have been betrayed or forgotten in the years after his arrival. Contrary to what Perry would have expected, the overthrow of the *bakufu* and the subsequent Meiji restoration brought an intensification, rather than a relaxation, of persecution against Christians. When considered in light of the European linking of trade and religion and the missionaries' recalcitrance, the renewed persecution in the Meiji period was not entirely surprising. Japan's policy vis-à-vis Christianity gradually changed and became more tolerant, but this improvement was not the result of European diplomatic efforts to "open" Japan. It was rather because of the openness of Japan toward the West that the government's anti-Christian stand eventually had to be relaxed. The fifth article of the *Charter Oath* (1868),<sup>44</sup> which stipulated "that knowledge be sought throughout the world," led Japan to further contact with the West.

Commodore Perry wrote that the victims of Western enthusiasm for making Japan Christian at both the beginning and at the end of the Tokugawa era were the native Japanese Christians:

[I]t is a sad reflection that in the work of excluding Christianity from Japan, Romanists and Protestants alike bore their part. Neither can, with justice, reproach the other. If the worldliness and pride of the Portuguese Christian promoted him to conspiracy and

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<sup>43</sup> Lehman, "French Catholic Missionaries," p. 389.

<sup>44</sup> The *Charter Oath* was the statement of national policy that Emperor Meiji pledged to his imperial ancestors 6 April 1868.

drove him and his companions from the Empire, the avarice and cruelty of the Dutch professed believer finished the work, and extirpated the last remnant of the faith in the destruction of the native followers of Christ. True Christianity indignantly disowns both.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hawks, *Narrative of the Exposition*, p. 32.