

CHRISTIANITY IN JAPAN: A HISTORY  
DEFINED BY GREAT INFLUENCE AND SUDDEN DECLINE

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Section I: Introduction

In this paper, I will describe and explain the “Christian Century” in Japan from 1542 to 1639, when Portuguese and Spanish merchants and Catholic missionaries influenced the country through trade and religion. I will describe how and why Christianity was eventually banned and explain what happened to Christian believers after 1639. I decided to write my research paper on this topic, because I want to study how Christians in Japan, who represented approximately 10 percent of the entire population at their peak, have decreased to represent less than 1 percent of the population today. Also, Japan is one of the few countries in which there are almost no religious disputes. Today, religion plays a very minor role in Japanese society. I want to investigate the reasons why this has happened.

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## Section II: Research Question and Hypothesis

My research questions for this paper are: Why did the persecution of Christians occur in Japan during the late unification period and the Tokugawa period? How did it continue to be practiced? My hypothesis for this research question is: The Shogunate persecuted Christians because it feared its influence on the different social classes. Christianity continued to be practiced in secret, after it was banned, by “Kakure-Kirishitan.” Throughout this research paper, I will refer to the research questions and hypotheses after each section and explain its relevance. In the last section, I will evaluate whether my hypotheses were correct.

## Section III: The Arrival of Christianity in Japan

Japan before 1543, was only known to Westerners as a remote country called Zipangu, through the Far Eastern travel accounts of Marco Polo, a Venetian explorer. However, Marco Polo wrote about Japan on the basis of what he learned in China and never himself visited Japan. The first Europeans to arrive in Japan were three Portuguese merchant adventurers who were shipwrecked on an island, 32 miles off the southern tip of Kyushu, known as Tanegashima, in 1543. It was on the shores of this island, where a Japanese person and a Westerner, through a Chinese interpreter, engaged in a conversation, for the first time.<sup>1</sup> It was also on this island that trade between Japan and Europe occurred for the first time, when Tanegashima Tokitaka, the lord of the island, bought muskets which were in the possession of the Portuguese. Tanegashima Tokitaka was amazed by the destruction the muskets could cause and realized he would be at a great advantage in battle if he could acquire more of them. He ordered the Portuguese to return with more muskets, and in return, gave them silver, which was a mineral abundant in Japan at the time. This is how trade between Europe and Japan began.<sup>2</sup>

As trade with Europe flourished in the mid-1500s, the Portuguese and Spanish merchants, brought valuable products to trade like weapons, clocks, and Chinese silk and porcelain, along with their religion, Christianity. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary, was the first Christian to arrive in Japan. He had been inspired to spread the Holy word in Japan by a Japanese fugitive named Yajiro, who had escaped charges for manslaughter against him by concealing himself aboard a Portuguese ship and fleeing to Goa, India. After arriving in Goa, Yajiro studied at the Jesuit College of St. Paul, where he mastered Portuguese and was baptized. He convinced Xavier that people in Japan were ready to be evangelized and told him that if he could sufficiently answer the inquiries put to him about Christianity, people in Japan would convert within six months. Following Yajiro's advice, Francis Xavier, Yajiro, and two other Spanish Jesuits, Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernandes, set sail for Japan, arriving at Shimazu (modern day Kagoshima), in 1549.<sup>3</sup> Xavier and his companions began spreading Christianity in Shimazu under the protection of the daimyo, Shimazu Takahisa. However, resentment by Buddhist priests led to Xavier relocating his missionary efforts to an island off the coast of Northern Kyushu called Hirado. Once missionary reinforcements arrived in 1552, Christianity began to spread at a greater rate, especially in Kyushu.<sup>4</sup> By 1582, Christian converts reached an estimated 115,000 just in the Hizen, Higo, and Iki provinces, which correspond to modern day Saga, Nagasaki, and Kumamoto prefectures, although there were only 55 missionaries in the whole of Japan.<sup>5</sup> The Jesuits were very successful in spreading Christianity.

In 1592, 43 years after the arrival of Jesuits, Franciscan missionaries arrived in Japan. In the subsequent years, with additional missionaries, the Franciscans established friaries in Kyoto, Osaka, and Nagasaki. Although the Franciscans were also Christian, the method they used to spread the religion was quite different from the Jesuits'.<sup>6</sup> The method to attain converts, followed by the Jesuits, was to first convert the people in the upper class of the social hierarchy. Evidence of this is the fact that in 1550, Francis Xavier, along with Father Torres and two other Japanese Christians, made a journey to Kyoto with intentions to convert the Emperor him-

self.<sup>7</sup> This method was based on the theory that if the members of the highest class of the social hierarchy were converted, those in the lower classes would follow, which was exactly what happened in the Bungo province (modern day Nagasaki and Saga).<sup>8</sup> The Franciscans took an opposite method to convert people in Japan. All action taken by Franciscan missionaries was based on the question, "What would Jesus do?" Hence, the Franciscans thought they needed to convert the members of the lowest class of the social hierarchy, who were in the greatest need of salvation, first. After their arrival in 1592, the Franciscans not only established friaries, but also schools, hospitals, and orphanages for the poor.<sup>9</sup> These two contrasting methods of conversion taken by the Jesuits and Franciscans, which were both successful, contributed to the high conversion rates in the late 1500s.

This section is relevant to my research question and hypothesis because to identify the reasons why Christians were persecuted in Japan, during the late Unification period and Tokugawa period, it is important to know the background of how Christianity arrived in Japan. This section is also relevant because it describes the extent of the spread of Christianity during the late Unification period. As explained in the previous paragraphs, Christians in Japan had spread to represent a third of the population in Kyushu and 10 percent of the population in Japan by the end of the Unification period. This sudden emergence of a barbarian religion in Japan was a matter of concern for the shogun, Toyotomi Hideyoshi.<sup>10</sup>

#### Section IV: Reasons Behind the Successful Conversion of the Japanese

The surprisingly high number of Christian converts attained after the initial introduction of Christianity to Japan, by Francis Xavier, was not a result of a miracle, but of strategic decisions made by the daimyo. After arriving in 1549, Jesuit missionaries, under Francis Xavier, urged Portuguese traders to stop only at ports where the daimyo was Christian or allowed the church in his province.<sup>11</sup> This gave the daimyo who had converted to Chris-

tianity or accepted Christianity an advantage of trade with the Portuguese. Since trade with the Portuguese was essential for the daimyo, who were all desperate for guns to fight their enemies, this strategy adopted by the Jesuits was efficacious. This led to numerous Christian daimyo, known in Japan as Kirishitan daimyo, to emerge, including powerful daimyo such as Omura Sumitada, Arima Harunobu, and Date Masamune. However, the faiths of the daimyo were superficial because they had only converted for the profits they could gain and not for their genuine faith in the religion.<sup>12</sup> This is why, as soon as the persecution of Christians was enforced in the early 1600s, many daimyo, like Date Masamune, abandoned Christianity and began persecuting Christians themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Most samurai and peasants were converted under the pressure from a Christian daimyo. A perfect example of how the samurai and peasants had no autonomy over their religious affiliation was the situation in Arima province (modern-day Nagasaki). When Jesuits arrived in Arima, the daimyo, Arima Yoshizumi, converted to Christianity and urged the people in his domain to follow him. However, when he died in 1571, his son, Arima Harunobu, who had not converted, grasped hold of power. Harunobu began persecuting Christians, and as a result, samurai and peasants were forced to abandon Christianity. However, when his enemy, Ryuzoji Takanobu, began to expand his territory into Harunobu's domain, Harunobu turned to the Jesuits for help and was baptized. The samurai and peasants were once again urged to convert back to Christianity. This fickle nature of daimyo at this time was common, and samurai and peasants suffered from it. Although the statistics show that great proportions of the Japanese people were converted, in reality, most of these people had never even met a priest and did not know anything about their own religion. However, a handful of samurai and peasants, given the opportunity to meet a priest or listen to the words of the Bible, were amazed by the radical ideas that the religion introduced, such as unconditional love. These people became devoted Christians who did not abandon their religion even through severe persecution.<sup>14</sup>

This section is relevant to my research question and hypothesis because it provides the information that allows me to suggest that, in contrast to my hypothesis, the Shogunate persecuted Christians because it feared the radical ideas Christianity introduced. I stated in my hypothesis that the Shogunate feared the influence of Christianity on its people, but more specifically, it feared its ideologies. Although many Christian converts were attained, especially in Kyushu, most of them, as explained in this section, only converted because they were forced to. Hence, although the astonishing number of converts may lead one to think that Christianity influenced people in Kyushu to a great extent, since most of the converts did not know much about their religion, Christianity only influenced a handful of people who had the opportunity to meet a missionary or listen to the Bible.

#### Section V: Problems with Christianity

Although Christianity brought prosperity to Japan, because through it, daimyo could benefit from Portuguese and Spanish trade, there were many problems that the religion posed to the Shogunate, which ultimately led to the persecution of Christians. One major problem was that the Shogunate gradually began to consider Christianity a military threat. In the 1580s, relationships between Jesuit missionaries and the Shogunate, headed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, were going well. Hideyoshi trusted the Jesuit Superior Gaspar Coelho enough that in 1586, he invited the priest to his castle in Osaka, where he revealed to Coelho his military aspirations. In response, Coelho promised Hideyoshi that he would marshal the power of the Christian daimyo on Hideyoshi's behalf. However, it was very foolish for Coelho to offer this, because Hideyoshi became threatened by the thought of armed Christian warriors under Coelho's control who could help him but also potentially fight against him. This was the first time the Jesuits involved themselves in Japanese politics, which was directly against the warning of Valignano, a prominent Jesuit missionary, that it

would be unwise for Jesuit missionaries to take sides in domestic politics.<sup>15</sup> This meeting at Osaka castle triggered Hideyoshi's fear of the military influence of Jesuit missionaries. This fear and the paranoia caused by it finally exploded in July 1587.

After Hideyoshi successfully extended his military control to Kyushu, in July 1587, Coelho travelled to Hakata, where Hideyoshi was resting his army, to congratulate his victory. Coelho arrived in Hakata on a well-equipped ship with artillery. Hideyoshi immediately demanded to be taken onboard and inspected the ship. He then demanded to inspect a ship he had spotted while crossing Hakata Bay, which was anchored at Hirado Island. Coelho agreed, but the Portuguese captain of the ship explained to the two of them that the ship could not be safely moved into Hakata Bay. It seemed as if Hideyoshi accepted the explanation, but within 24 hours, he issued an edict declaring Japan to be a "Land of the Gods" where Christianity was undesirable. The edict ordered all Christian missionaries to return to their respective countries within 20 days of its issuance. Although the edict was not enforced, and the relationship between Christians and the Shogunate improved once again in the next couple of years, this was the first time Christianity was officially forbidden in Japan.<sup>16</sup> The Shogunate considered Christianity a military threat, which ultimately led to Hideyoshi's persecution of Christians.

The fact that Hideyoshi considered Christianity a military threat in Japan does not prove whether it actually was a military threat. There are contrasting approaches to this issue. One approach, that the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries had intentions to eventually conquer Japan, can be supported by the grant to Spain by the pope, Alexander VI, of all "firm land and islands found or to be found towards India, or towards any other part whatsoever."<sup>42</sup> As seen in the colonization of numerous countries such as India and Vietnam, the initial steps of colonization by European powers have often been taken through trade and missions. Trade between European countries and Japan was prospering until Hideyoshi banned it. The situation at the time that the numbers of Portuguese and Spanish merchants were increasing

and that their influence were also increasing was a parallel to the way the East India Company initially attained power in India, before conquering it in its entirety, with the help of the British military. This shows that Christian missionaries, as assumed by Hideyoshi, may have posed a military threat to Japan. On the other hand, the other approach to the issue is that the Christian missionaries did not have any intention to pose a military threat to the Shogunate. From the point of view of European leaders, Japan was a country overshadowed by Chinese dominance, and colonizing it would not have been very beneficial to them. Geographically, Japan was located in the Far East, which is not a very strategic location in terms of trade by sea, and was also an extremely mountainous country, making it difficult to conquer. Japan was also very overpopulated and had powerful and capable armies. Hence, the colonization of Japan by countries like Portugal and Spain would not have been very beneficial to them. This supports the approach that Christian missionaries genuinely wished just to spread Christianity in Japan and that they did not intend to pose a military threat to the Shogunate.<sup>43</sup>

Another problem with Christianity in Japan was the loss of Jesuit monopoly over missions in Japan and the resultant increase in rivalries among the different congregations of Christianity. The first type of Christians to arrive in Japan, following the Jesuits, was the Spanish Franciscans who arrived in 1592. The Franciscans were followed by Dutch and British Protestants. Rivalry was severe especially between Franciscans and Jesuits who followed drastically different ideals, as explained in Section III. These different congregations of Christianity laid bare European religious conflicts to Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was the shogun who succeeded Hideyoshi. Ieyasu, who feared the intrusion of any authority that might challenge his own, felt threatened by these religious conflicts.<sup>17</sup>

Ieyasu feared that a civil war could spark between the two opposing congregations, which would lead to the interference of the Spanish and Portuguese armies assisting either of them. Ieyasu thought this would send Japan into turmoil and would result in Japan losing its independence. To prevent this, Ieyasu initiated the persecution of Christians, following Hideyoshi's methods.



Another problem with Christianity in Japan was the radical ideas it introduced, which undermined the loyalty of converted samurai and peasants, to their daimyo. When Christianity was introduced to Japan in 1549 by Francis Xavier, the Japanese social structure was based on a type of Confucianism known as Neo-Confucianism. Under the Neo-Confucian philosophy, society was centered on a social hierarchy, in which the ruler-subject relation was considered the most important, unlike Confucianism in which the father-son relationship was the priority. The Christian ideals of equality before God hindered this strict hierarchy, which consolidated the powers of the daimyo over their people and prevented peasants and samurai from revolting. Since Christian ideals, unlike Neo-Confucian ideals, did not oblige believers to serve their rulers, the loyalty of converted samurai and peasants to their daimyo became questionable.<sup>18</sup>

This section is relevant to my research question and hypothesis because it explains the problems Christianity imposed on the Shogunate, which ultimately led to it initiating the persecution of Christians. In my hypothesis, I wrote that Christians were persecuted in Japan because the Shogunate feared the influence they had on society. More precisely, the Shogunate, under Hideyoshi and Ieyasu, feared the intrusion of foreign powers, which may threaten its authority. The Shogunate also despised Christianity for its influence on the strict social structure, which it had caused by introducing radical ideas of equality to peasants and samurai.

## Section VI: Persecution of Christians

The problems with Christianity in Japan, explained in the previous section, ultimately led to the severe persecution of Christians in Japan. The first form of persecution that took place under the Shogunate was the issuance of the edict outlawing Christianity, passed by Hideyoshi in 1587. Although this edict was not strictly enforced and Jesuit missionaries still remained in Japan, Takayama Ukon, the daimyo over Nagasaki, was stripped of his lands when he refused to apostatize.<sup>19</sup>

The first violent persecution of Christians occurred in 1597, when 26 Christians were crucified in Nagasaki. This crucifixion of the 26 Christians occurred as a result of a conflict between Jesuits and Franciscans and the Shogunate. In 1596, a Spanish trading ship, the *San Felipe*, laden with rich cargo, on its way to Acapulco, from Manila, was blown off course by a typhoon, to waters off the coast of Shikoku. Local officials seized the cargo, which sparked protests from the Jesuits and Franciscans. Hideyoshi, paranoid because of the failure of the invasion of Korea, which he had initiated in 1593, responded to the protests by ordering the crucifixion of all Christians in Kyoto.<sup>20</sup> Sympathetic officials managed to reduce the number of Christians crucified from all Christians in Kyoto to a handful, but on 9 January 1597, 26 Christians, including three young boys, were forced to march a cold and long journey to Nagasaki, with one ear cut off and hands bound behind. Once arriving in Nagasaki, the 26 Christians were publicly crucified on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1597, on crosses set up on a small hill overlooking the town.<sup>21</sup> These victims later came to be known as the “Twenty-Six Martyrs,” and their crucifixion marked the beginning of a two-and-a-half-century-long era of the violent persecution of Christians in Japan.

After ordering the martyrdom of the 26 Christians in Nagasaki, Hideyoshi reiterated the edict against Christianity, which he had issued in 1587. However, the following year, Hideyoshi died and was eventually succeeded by Tokugawa Ieyasu, who grasped hold of power through the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Although Ieyasu, as shogun himself, did not conduct any major persecution of Christians, his son Hidetada, who succeeded him as shogun in 1605, initiated relentless persecution. On 27<sup>th</sup> January 1614, Hidetada passed an edict forbidding Christianity in Japan and ordering all missionaries and other Christians to be deported. Unlike the edict passed in 1587 by Hideyoshi, this edict was strictly enforced and only 37 missionaries succeeded in remaining in Japan. The persecution of Christians intensified as the years passed, and the number of martyrdoms increased. In 1620, when two priests were caught trying to enter Japan aboard

a Portuguese trading ship, the daimyo of Hirado executed both priests, the entire crew onboard, and also all Christian prisoners detained in Nagasaki. Iemitsu, who succeeded Hidetada in 1623 as shogun, was even more ferocious against Christians and began his rule by holding a mass martyrdom where 50 Christians were burned alive. Under Iemitsu, Christians were executed through excessively brutal methods, such as being crucified, suffocated in human excreta, or boiled alive in hot springs, to promote apostasy. The severe persecution of Christians over the years was very effective, and by 1640, most Christian converts had apostatized, except a handful of believers who continued to practice their religion in secret.<sup>22</sup>

One practice used to discover hidden Christians that began in Nagasaki and spread to the rest of Japan was the ebumi or efumi practice. The ebumi practice was held every year on the 4th of January, beginning in 1629 and continuing until 1858, at the office of the local magistrate in every town and village across Japan. Citizens were ordered to step on a picture, depicting either Maria with baby Jesus or Jesus' crucifixion, known as *fumie*, literally meaning picture to step on. Anyone who refused to step on the *fumie* was accused as a Christian and brutally executed. This method was very efficacious in discovering Christians, because a number of faithful Christians would rather die than to step on an image of their God.<sup>23</sup>

This section is relevant to my research question and hypothesis, because it explains how Christians were persecuted by the Shogunate during the late Unification and Tokugawa periods. In my hypothesis, I wrote that Christians were persecuted through executions. However, these executions were not typical executions like hanging, but were designed to be as brutal as possible. The Shogunate made the executions of Christians as brutal as possible to convince Christian converts to apostatize.

## Section VII: Shimabara Rebellion

The Shimabara rebellion was the first and last major Christian rebellion that occurred against the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1637. Shimabara, located on a peninsula in modern day Nagasaki prefecture, once had a Christian daimyo, and Christianity was widespread. However, the Christian daimyo was soon replaced after Ieyasu won the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. The new daimyo imposed heavy taxes on the farmers and promoted the persecution of Christians. Farmers who failed to pay taxes were forced to wear straw coats, which were set on fire, ultimately killing them. To fight against the injustice, a rebel army of about 37,000 people, consisting of wandering samurai known as ronin, farmers, and their wives and children, was assembled to fight the daimyo. To counter the rebels, the Tokugawa Shogunate mobilized an army of 20,000 men. However, the battle between the government army, consisting of highly trained samurai, and the rebel force resulted in the victory of the rebel force due to its strategic decision to entrench itself in a bastion of strong defense. The Shogunate, shocked by the failure of its army, mobilized a larger army of 120,000 soldiers with the aim to suppress the rebels.<sup>24</sup> Even this massive army of 120,000 soldiers had difficulty in defeating the rebel forces, united by faith, until it was finally able to cut their supply line, eventually starving the rebel army to defeat them.<sup>25</sup> The Shogunate's army was able to cut the supply line with the aid of a Dutch Vessel, the *de Ruy*, which had been anchored on Hirado island. From the 20 guns onboard the *de Ruy*, approximately 426 rounds were fired over a period of 15 days, resulting in the defeat of the rebels. This rebellion showed Iemitsu how powerful people could be when united under a religion and reasserted the threat Christianity posed to the Shogunate's authority.

The leader of the Shimabara movement was a 16-year-old teenager named Amakusa Shiro. Amakusa Shiro was a dedicated Christian and was also called the "Son of God" due to his handsome features. There are various legends about him such as how

he broke a twig without touching it, how a dove laid an egg on his palm, and how he walked on the sea. People in Shimabara admired Shiro's wisdom, beauty, and purity. Their strong admiration and loyalty to him is evident in the fact that when Shiro raised the rebel army to fight the injustice in 1637, more than 90 percent of the farmers joined voluntarily. It was not only the farmers' united faith in God that enabled them to fight persistently against a larger army of highly trained samurai, but also their united admiration of Shiro and his leadership. However, Shiro was also a cause of the defeat of the rebel force. During a battle with the massive 120,000 force, Shiro was shot and wounded. The farmers were strongly agitated when they discovered that Shiro, who they believed was the "Son of God," had been wounded. The Shogunate's forces took advantage of this agitation, ultimately leading to the defeat of the rebel forces. Although he died in vain, Amakusa Shiro is still remembered today as a hero who fought valiantly for his faith and for justice.<sup>26</sup>

This section is relevant to my research question and hypothesis because it explains one reaction of Christians in Japan against the brutal oppression they faced, which is important to know when studying the persecution of Christians in Japan. The Shimabara rebellion, along with the numerous problems Christianity posed for the Shogunate, was also another reason for enforcing the persecution of Christians in Japan.

#### Section VII: *Kakure Kirishitan*

By 1650, after the persecution of Christians had been occurring for over 50 years and had continuously been enforced after incidents such as the Shimabara rebellion, Iemitsu was confident that he had eradicated Christianity from Japan. For the subsequent 200 years, there were no signs of Christians in Japan. However, when prohibitions against Roman Catholics were relaxed in the mid-19th century and European priests returned to Japan, they were surprised to be encountered by Japanese locals who claimed

to be Christians. These locals, known as *kakure kirishitan*, meaning hidden Christians, had been secretly practicing Christianity in remote regions such as the Goto islands and Ikitsukishima Island off the coast of Kyushu.<sup>27, 28</sup> To avoid detection, *kakure kirishitan* worshiped Christian images in disguise such as Mother Mary in the form of the Buddhist god, Kannon. These images, hidden in cupboards and known to *kakure kirishitan* as “*nando gami*” (gods in the closet), were only taken out on special occasions, such as Christmas. As the persecution against Christians in Japan was relaxed and an increasing number of Catholic priests returned to Japan, more and more *kakure kirishitan* dropped their disguises and by 1865, 20,000 *kakure kirishitan* were publicly practicing their religion.<sup>29</sup>

Although these *kakure kirishitan* considered themselves Christian, when they met Catholic priests in the mid-1800s, they discovered significant differences between the rituals they practiced and those of the Roman Catholic Church. Two hundred years of isolation from the church and the Bible had caused the *kakure kirishitan* to incorporate some aspects of Buddhism and Shintoism into their religion. For example, the *kakure kirishitan* believe that along with God, the martyrs who died for Christianity are also gods. The *kakure kirishitan* also recite chants known as “*orasho*” which, even *kakure kirishitan* themselves admit do not make any sense, but have been passed on from generation to generation. These “*orasho*” chants originate from the Latin “*oratio*” chants. For example, part of the ritual prayers recited by Oka Tomeichi and his congregation on Ikitsukishima Island is, “*Ame Maria karassa binno domisu terikobintsu*” instead of the Latin “*Ave Maria gratia plena dominus tecum benedicta*.”<sup>30</sup> Although a portion of the *kakure kirishitan* established relations with the Catholic priests and entered the Roman Catholic Church, a majority of them decided to follow their non-Christian traditions, which had crept into their religion as a result of two centuries of isolation. These *kakure kirishitan* later came to be known as *hanare kirishitan* (meaning separate Christians).<sup>31</sup>

This section is relevant to my research questions and hypothesis because it explains how Christianity continued to be practiced in Japan through severe oppression and persecution. In my hypothesis, I stated that Christianity was practiced in secret by *kakure kirishitan*. However, now I know that this is wrong. Although *kakure kirishitan* thought they were practicing Christianity, two centuries of isolation from the Church and the Bible had allowed numerous Buddhist and Shinto rituals to be integrated into what they called Christianity. Hence, after the Tokugawa Shogunate had exiled all Christian missionaries from Japan in the early 1600s, only a small portion of the people continued to practice an evolved form of Christianity, which cannot be termed orthodox Christianity. Therefore, Christianity was not practiced in Japan during the period of isolation, between the mid 1600s and mid 1800s.

#### Section VIII: Comparison with Persecution of Christians in China

After World War II, the Communist Party of China, under its leader, Mao Zedong, imposed strict laws to regulate religions, including Christianity, and began persecuting followers if the laws were broken. It officially recognized five religions, namely, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. To monitor Christianity, two state-controlled organizations, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) to monitor Protestants, and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) to monitor Catholics, were established. Only churches with religious leaders who supported the Communist Party were allowed to register with these groups. Churches that were not registered were declared illegal and its members were persecuted through imprisonment and re-education at labor camps. During the Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1976, even these state-operated organizations were banned and the Church was forced underground, similar to the way Christians in Japan were forced to practice Christianity in secret and become *Kakure-Kirishitan*, after the failure of the Shimabara Rebellion.<sup>37</sup> Although owning a Bible is no longer illegal in China and the

government even sponsors the printing of 8,000,000 Bibles a month, brutal persecution of Christians, unregistered with the TSPM or CPA still occurs today.<sup>38</sup> For example, Liu Haitong, a 19-year-old member of an underground church in Jiaozuo city, in Henan province, was arrested on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2000. He was taken to prison and brutally beaten until he died, after the police refused to provide him with medical care.<sup>39</sup> Although the extent of persecution of Christians in China today is less severe compared to the persecution of Christians in Tokugawa Japan, the reasons for the persecution are similar. Christianity contradicted the ideals of Neo-Confucianism in Japan and contradicts the ideology of Communism in China. This contradiction resulted in threats to the social order and to the stability of power in both cases. This comparison between the persecution of Christians in China and Tokugawa Japan reveals how the persecution of the followers of the same religion can occur, in two contrasting countries, in different time periods, for similar reasons.

#### Section IX: Visit to *Nanban* Art Exhibition

On the recommendation of my teacher, I visited a *Nanban* Art exhibition in Tokyo, with the intention to learn more about the “Christian Century” in Japan. *Nanban* art refers to art created during the “Christian Century,” between 1542 and 1639, portraying the *Nanban-jin* (the Southern Barbarians), referring to European traders. The exhibition had different types of artifacts like folding screens, known as *byōbu* in Japanese, elaborate maps of the world, drawn by Japanese artisans based on what they learned from European traders, and small mementos depicting Christian images like pendants and coins, possessed in secret by *kakure kirishitan*. Other than admiring the various artifacts, kept in great condition for almost 500 years, I noticed many things that were interesting as I strolled through the exhibition. The first sight that surprised me was how crowded the exhibition was. Although it was the last day of the exhibition when I visited, I had to wait in line to read the descriptions of each of the artifacts. This may sound like it



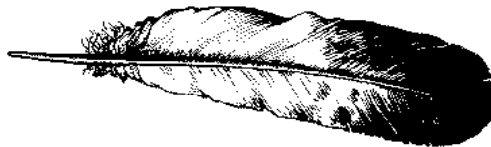
was a nuisance to me but when I noticed how crowded it was, I was filled with joy. I was enthralled by the realization that so many people shared my interest in the “Christian Century.” One feature I noticed, common to most of the paintings and folding screens, was the extravagant manner in which *Nanban-jin* were portrayed, using vibrant colors. They were also portrayed as significantly taller and larger than the Japanese. This common manner in which Japanese artisans depicted European traders suggests how people in Japan considered the barbaric traders eccentric. However, at the same time, the European traders were always the foci of the art works, showing how people in Japan were keenly interested in the traders. One more observation that surprised me was the fact that many of the well-preserved artifacts displayed, were obtained from prisons in Nagasaki. Once the ban on Christianity was strictly enforced by Hidetada in the early 1600s, prisons in Nagasaki detained Christians who were unwilling to apostatize, and also confiscated all objects and art works that carried symbols of Christianity. I had assumed that these objects, confiscated by prisons in Nagasaki, had all been destroyed, because the Shogunate wanted to completely eradicate Christianity from Japan. However, my assumptions were wrong. The reasons why the Shogunate did not destroy these artifacts could be because it wanted to keep a historical record of Christianity in Japan and also so that they could be used to identify other objects with Christian symbols, which may be discovered in the future. The preserved Christian artifacts may have also been used as tools to interrogate Christian prisoners. In conclusion, my visit to the *Nanban* art exhibition was very edifying. I learned a number of things about the “Christian Century” that would have been impossible for me to learn just by researching through books or the internet. My experience at the exhibition reminded me of the importance of taking action to learn more about a certain subject.

## Section X: Conclusion

The Christian century in Japan began with the arrival of the Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, in 1549. Christianity spread throughout Kyushu at an exponential rate because by converting, daimyo could benefit from trade with the Portuguese. However, as the influence of Christianity in Japan steadily increased, the Shogunate under Hideyoshi felt a military threat. Christianity also introduced radical ideologies, contradicting Neo-Confucianism, which was the center of Japanese society at the time. These problems sparked the persecution of Christians, which began in 1587, under Hideyoshi. The persecution of Christians was enforced in the subsequent years, and increasingly brutal methods were adopted to promote apostasy. The only major Christian rebellion that occurred was the Shimabara rebellion, which began as a farmers' rebellion, in 1637. Once this rebellion was suppressed, Christians in Japan had no choice but to apostatize, seek refuge out of Japan like Takayama Ukon, or migrate to remote regions, where they could continue practicing Christianity in secret. Those who chose the latter course came to be known as *kakure kirishitan* and continued to practice their religion for over two centuries. However, isolation from the church and the Bible allowed many aspects of Buddhism and Shintoism to be incorporated into their religion, and, when they met with Christian priests in the 1860s, *kakure kirishitan* realized their religion had evolved from Christianity. Hence, the Shogunate, by isolating Japan, had successfully eradicated "real" Christianity. By comparing the persecution of Christians in Japan to other religious persecutions such as the religious persecution in China, it is evident that the persecution of a religion can occur, in contrasting nations and in varying time periods, for similar reasons.

## Section XI: Evaluation

Now that I have researched my topic, I only agree with some aspects of my hypotheses. Here is a more accurate answer to my research questions: Christians in Japan were persecuted, through brutal executions in Japan, during the late Unification period and the Tokugawa period. These executions were designed to be as brutal as possible to promote apostasy. Christianity was persecuted in Japan for three main reasons. One was because the Shogunate considered the religion a military threat with its powerful influence on the Christian daimyo in Kyushu. Another was the religious conflict among the different congregations of Christianity, which began after the Jesuits lost their monopoly over missions in Japan in 1592, with the arrival of the Franciscans. One more reason was the radical ideas, contradicting the Neo-Confucian philosophy that centered Japanese society at the time, it introduced. After the ban on Christianity was enforced in the early 1600s, “real” Christianity was no longer practiced in Japan. Although some Christians, known as *kakure kirishitan*, migrated to remote regions, where they practiced what they called Christianity in secret, their religion evolved and diverged from Christian practices over time, due to two centuries of isolation from the church and the Bible.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Christal Whelan, The Beginning of Heaven and Earth (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996) p. 3
- <sup>2</sup> Glenn Scoggins, ed., Japanese History Sourcebook 3rd revised and expanded edition, Vol. 2, "Chapter 4B: The Sixteenth Century," Sec. 4B03, 4B04, 4B10, pp. 123–124
- <sup>3</sup> Whelan, p. 4
- <sup>4</sup> Stuart D.B. Pickens and Edwin O Reischauer, Christianity and Japan (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1983) p. 29
- <sup>5</sup> Scoggins, p. 124
- <sup>6</sup> Friars Minor in Japan [Online], available from: [http://www.ofm-j.or.jp/doc/Friars\\_Minor\\_in\\_Japan.pdf](http://www.ofm-j.or.jp/doc/Friars_Minor_in_Japan.pdf) (accessed 21 November 2011)
- <sup>7</sup> Pickens and Reischauer, p. 32
- <sup>8</sup> Whelan, p. 5
- <sup>9</sup> Friars Minor in Japan
- <sup>10</sup> Scoggins, p. 124
- <sup>11</sup> Whelan, p. 5
- <sup>12</sup> Alessandro Valignano and the Restructuring of the Jesuit Mission in Japan, 1579–1582 [Online], available from: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu> (accessed 22 November 2011)
- <sup>13</sup> Scoggins, p. 118
- <sup>14</sup> Alessandro Valignano and the Restructuring of the Jesuit Mission in Japan, 1579–1582
- <sup>15</sup> Pickens and Reischauer, pp. 41–44
- <sup>16</sup> George Ellison, Deus Destroyed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) p. 115
- <sup>17</sup> Pickens and Reischauer, pp. 44–45
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44
- <sup>20</sup> Whelan, p. 7
- <sup>21</sup> Pickens and Reischauer, p. 45
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–48
- <sup>23</sup> "Fumie," Encyclopedia Britannica (accessed 27 November 2011)
- <sup>24</sup> "Amakusa Shiro," Who's Who of Japan (Tokyo: Japan Travel Bureau, 1996) pp. 100–101
- <sup>25</sup> "Shimabara Rebellion," Encyclopedia Britannica (accessed 27 November 2011)
- <sup>26</sup> Who's Who of Japan, pp. 100–101

- <sup>27</sup> Christal Whelan, "Japan's Vanishing Minority: The Kakure Kirishitan of the Goto Islands," Japan Quarterly (October–December, 1994) (accessed 2 November 2011)
- <sup>28</sup> Shinichi Yanagawa, "Rituals threatened by depopulation, apathy," The Daily Yomiuri (19 June 1999) (accessed 27 November 2011)
- <sup>29</sup> "Kirishitan," Encyclopedia Britannica (accessed 2 November 2011)
- <sup>30</sup> Michael Hoffman, "Japan's 'Hidden Christians,'" The Japan Times (April 2008) (accessed 2 November 2011)
- <sup>31</sup> "Kirishitan," Encyclopedia Britannica
- <sup>32</sup> Oita City [Online], available from: <http://www.city.oita.oita.jp> (accessed 10 December 2011)
- <sup>33</sup> Sakai City [Online,] available from: <http://www.city.sakai.lg.jp> (accessed 10 December 2011)
- <sup>34</sup> Naver Matome [Online], available from: <http://matome.naver.jp> (accessed 10 December 2011)
- <sup>35</sup> ?????[Online], available from: <http://www7a.biglobe.ne.jp> (accessed 10 December 2011)
- <sup>36</sup> Faith World [Online], available from: <http://blogs.reuters.com> (accessed 10 December 2011)
- <sup>37</sup> The Voice of the Martyrs [Online], available from: <http://www.persecution.net/china.htm> (accessed 11 December 2011)
- <sup>38</sup> Benedict Rogers, "Even under the spotlight, repression continues," The Guardian (August 2008) (accessed 11 December 2011)
- <sup>39</sup> Religious Persecution in China [Online], available from: <http://www.loyola.edu> (accessed 11 December 2011)
- <sup>40</sup> The Japan Project [Online], available from: <http://www.globaled.org> (accessed 11 December 2011)
- <sup>41</sup> The Campus Minister [Online], available from: <http://www.thecampusminister.com> (accessed 11 December 2011)
- <sup>42</sup> Free Truths [Online], available from: <http://freetruth.50webs.org> (accessed 11 December 2011)
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.

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In historiography, the Han official Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145-87 B.C.?) was China's first identifiable major figure, and he has won recognition as one of the greatest, most innovative, and most influential historians the world has produced. Inheriting his father's court post as Lord Grand Astrologer, which gave him access to court archives, he carried to completion a project initiated by his father—a history of the world up to his time (the world known to him and to China, of course). The resulting work, called the *Historical Records (Shih-chi)* is a masterpiece of both organization and style. Its 130 chapters include, in addition to a chronology of important events from the legendary Yellow Emperor down into Emperor Wu's reign, chronological tables for easy reference, historical treatises on topics such as music, the calendar, and waterways, and most important, hundreds of biographies of prominent or interesting people, the notorious as well as the famous. Ssu-ma Ch'ien established a pattern for organizing historical data that was used subsequently in a series of so-called dynastic histories, which preserve the history of imperial China in unsurpassed detail and uniquely systematic order. Moreover, Ssu-ma's lively style made his work a literary monument that has been read with delight by educated classes throughout East Asia.