Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan

Francis Xavier, of the Society of Jesus, was the first missionary to Japan from the West. In spite of the fact that he stayed there for only two years and three months, he formed a good understanding of the Japanese people. According to Takashi Gono, in his study of the early stages of Christianity in Japan, Francis Xavier recognized that 'ancestor worship was the root of the faith and strength of blood ties in Japan'.

Francis Xavier recognized that the most important concern of the Japanese people was the salvation of the dead, especially the way of salvation of blood relations, from hell. How to deal with the salvation of the dead was therefore the most important problem which missionaries faced. As Gono observes, 'Xavier understood deeply how Japanese people desired the salvation of blood relations.' This was a difficult problem for Xavier to solve, but although he could not reconcile it with Christianity, identifying it made him successful.

The reaction of Japanese people to Christianity in the sixteenth century was similar to their response today. It is still difficult for them to become Christian because Japanese people wish to be entombed in a family grave, usually of a Buddhist style. If they are buried together, then they will be able to be joined with their family in heaven.

Historically, Japanese religions are based on animism and naturism. After Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the sixth century, the religious form of worshipping the gods evolved into Shugo, which is translated into English as ‘syncretism’. This is due to the fact that Buddhism has a systematic doctrine. Shinto has existed as the pivot of Japanese religious history. However, although the form has changed, ancestor worship has always existed in Japan.

The aim of this paper is therefore threefold: (1) to examine ancestor worship within the history of religions in Japan; (2) to examine how Christianity has dealt with ancestor worship in Japan; and (3) to show
why Christianity did not syncretize with Japanese traditional religion, resulting in persecution. Broadly, we shall examine the fundamental problem of the lack of the indigenization of Christianity in Japan.

1. RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN JAPAN

The Rise of Faith in Ancestor Worship

We begin by asking from which stage in the history of Japan does ancestor worship originate? In order to answer this question we must consider the history of religion. The two major religious traditions of Japan are Shintoism and Buddhism, though some would also include Confucianism. In fact, the leadership in the Edo period (1603–1868) promulgated the national seclusion orders with a view to uniting the three religions of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Without doubt the thought of Confucius has influenced Japanese culture very significantly in the realms of education and ethics, but it did not become one of the religious traditions. Carolyn B. Francis and Masaaki Nakajima, a missionary and a pastor in Japan respectively, explain,

In different periods of history each has become the predominant religious influence. These traditions are interwoven throughout Japanese history to provide the basic framework of Japanese society. From them emerged the rites of passage conducted at each stage of the life cycle. They also dictate the forms for most personal and communal relationships in Japanese society today.

Traditional Japanese religious concepts differ from Western religious concepts, which grow out of the Judaeo-Christian heritage. Western religious faith is based on belief in a transcendent deity, a concept of human sin which separates human beings from the deity, a saving act by the deity which overcomes sin and reconciles human beings and the deity, and the human response of ultimate commitment to the deity in gratitude for salvation. According to the study already mentioned by Francis and Nakajima, the features of Japanese religious tradition include by contrast:

1. mutual interaction among religious traditions with minimal conflict and major mutual influence;
2. an intimate relationship between human beings and the many Kami (gods and spirits) found in nature or in the lives of certain human beings such as the emperor and shamans and in the dead as revered family ancestors;
3. an emphasis on the family, family lineage and ancestors above indi-
individual religious preference; the home serves as the centre of daily religious practice and temples and shrines as the places for annual and occasional ceremonies;
4. the concept of evil as human impurity that separates humans from one another and from Kami and the overcoming of this separation by rites of purification;
5. annual festivals that serve as the major communal religious celebrations, including rice planting and harvesting festivals and New Year's summer festivals;
6. a concept of religion as an integral part of daily life, including economic and social spheres;
7. the close relationship between religion and the state, with religious authority usually being subservient to political power.⁷

As already noted, the ancient, indigenous religion of Japan was formalized and given the name Shinto after other religions were introduced into Japan in the sixth century. Shinto is a set of indigenous, loosely organized religious practices, creeds, and attitudes at a communal level. It was also the official state religion of Japan during the period 1868 to 1945. Rice growing has been the basis of many important Shinto rites since wetland agriculture produced stable communities in Japan during the ancient Yayoi period up to 300 CE.

During the Kofun archaeological period (300–710 CE), many small kingdoms were unified under the powerful Yamato clan, out of which emerged the imperial lineage. The emperor served as the chief Shinto priest in all court rituals, which included the annual rice planting and harvesting ceremonies. Two major national Shinto shrines which were established during that period still exist today. Since each local clan also had its own shrine or shrines,⁸ Shintoism expanded and from the tenth century became increasingly a coherent religious system of myths, rituals, priests, and shrines. Although Shintoism dominated Japan toward the end of the Edo period (1603–1868), there emerged a nationalistic movement which called for a return to the source of Japanese identity, to imperial rule, and to Shinto as the sole religion of the country. This laid the foundations for the Meiji Restoration in 1868, under which the military shogunate was toppled from power and the emperor reinstated. Under Meiji imperial rule Shinto was declared to be the state religion. The emperor was proclaimed a god and Shinto shrines received government support. Shinto concepts were taught in schools throughout Japan until the end of World War II.⁹
Although the emperor formally denied his divinity after World War II, the denial had no significance for most Japanese, since they lacked a deep appreciation of the difference between God and kami. The emperor is still a figure of authority today.

Buddhist missionaries travelled from India to China in the early centuries of the Christian era, and from China Buddhism was introduced to Korea. In 552 CE a mission was sent from the king of Korea carrying Buddhist images, religious objects, and sutras (written precepts) to the emperor of Japan. The emperor welcomed the new religion, as did some court officials. Others declared that the Japanese gods would be displeased by the importation of a new religion. When those who supported Buddhism achieved power in the Nara period (710–794), Buddhism was made the state religion. Monasteries were established in each province of Japan and Buddhist studies began. Thus Japanese Buddhism first found favour with the ruling aristocrats and scholars. As Shintoism accepts many gods, Buddhism was not seen as a competitor and was easily accepted into Japanese religious life.

When Japan entered a period of relative peace under the Tokugawa shogunate, Confucianism played a major role in government and education. Confucius developed a philosophical, ethical, and political system of thought which also contained religious elements. He believed that the ideal, harmonious, hierarchical society could be achieved not through law, but through the moral example of the leaders, by the performance of proper rituals, and by individual behaviour appropriate to a person's status in society. Confucius maintained that rulers should choose public officials not on the basis of their birth, but in accordance with their moral and intellectual qualities.

A fourteenth-century heroic tale elevated the Confucian virtue of a warrior's loyalty to his lord above the virtue of filial piety. This loyalty became a dominant theme of Japanese Confucianism and was later adopted into the value system of the Japanese samurai (warrior) class. Sons of warriors received training for government leadership at feudal domain schools or at private schools. Tokugawa intellectual leaders wished their society to be patterned on the Confucian ideal of maintaining social harmony through a hierarchical social system which included four levels based on occupation – samurai, peasant, artisan, and merchant.

The Confucian virtue of samurai loyalty to a lord, adapted to subject loyalty to the emperor, was instrumental in bringing about the Meiji restoration of 1868. This same concept of loyalty also contributed to nationalistic unity, achieved through a synthesis of Confucianism, Shinto,
and the imperial ideology, which remained in place until the end of World War II. A concrete expression of this synthesis was the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890, which stressed the Shinto tradition of the imperial lineage and the Confucian concept of the subject’s loyalty to the emperor. The Rescript was implemented not only in Japan, but also in Japan’s Asian colonies of Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, and China. Only a few Japanese scholars pursue Confucian studies today. Confucian concepts continue to exert an important influence, however, in language, education, government, family, and society, extolling the virtues of loyalty, hierarchy, and social harmony.

The origins of ancestor worship in Japan are uncertain. It is said that Japanese people engage in ancestor worship with the same enthusiasm as the Chinese: it is possible that the tradition came from China. However this may be, ancestor worship arose in ancient Japanese society in the form of worshipping guardian gods. These guardian gods were not only ancestors, but gods of nature such as the sun and mountains. This faith in guardian gods was a fundamental aspect of Shintoism. According to Takashi Maeda, ‘Fear of the dead is found to be extremely intense in uncivilized regions. As culture evolves, however, this fear grows weaker and the yearning for the dead emerges to take its place.’

*The Basis in Japanese Religion*

In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Ruth Benedict indicated that the ‘Japanese Principle’ was based on neither Buddhism nor Confucianism. Ichiro Hori also introduced the ‘Shintoized Principle’ under the influence of Robert N. Bellah, a scholar of Shintoism, who addressed an international conference in 1967. According to Hori both the Japanese Principle and the Shintoized Principle are integrated into Japanese religion, making it a tradition: ‘Japanese Religion as a whole’. But what is the essence of ‘Japanese Religion as a whole’?

As previously outlined, Japanese religious traditions began with the worship of many gods. There was a later syncretizing of agricultural observance and the religious observance of guardian gods. Ancestor worship arose from these conditions and was subsumed under Shintoism. After the introduction of Buddhism, the syncretistic fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism occurred as *Shugo*. In the Edo period another form of *Shugo* occurred, expressing the same syncretic fusion. The phenomenon of *Shugo* gave form to Japanese Religion as a whole. Needless to say, ancestor worship was a fundamental element.

Takashi Maeda points to the social factors responsible for the rise of
ancestor worship. He refers to an agricultural society as one of the most powerful factors underlying the custom. Ancestor worship is generated by the fact that survivors always cherish a fresh memory of the deceased members of their families. The freshness of the memory intensifies the worship. In order for the dead to remain fresh in the memory, it is necessary that some object of reminiscence, such as a house, a legacy, or a grave, always remain within the daily reach of the descendants. A second factor is the extended patriarchal family, and a third factor is the closed community with its affection. A final factor is patriarchal authority.14 The agricultural society and the extended patriarchal family are both important for the emergence of ancestor worship.

2. CHRISTIANITY AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN JAPAN

The first 350 years of Christianity in Japan were years of oppression. The main reasons for this oppression were (1) the Christian Mission was a part of the colonial policy of western nations; (2) Japanese, especially the holders of power in the feudal system, found Christianity troublesome because monotheism contradicted the Japanese feudal system; and (3) Christianity refuted the traditional view of Japan as a divine land. The introduction of Christianity was for the Japanese not simply contact with heterogeneous thought; it also meant contact with a more complex theology. This was the main reason why missionaries had to be flexible. Buddhism already had a history of a thousand years since its introduction: it existed as Japanized Buddhism, changed by Shugo. Christian missionaries began to dispute the nature of Japanese thought with Buddhist monks. In the course of these disputation differences between the religions emerged, including beliefs about God as Creator, sin, love, and salvation. In the course of examining the points of disagreement in these doctrinal disputations, a number of obstacles emerge, standing in the way of the reception of Christianity.

As Francis Xavier recognized, the most important concern of the Japanese people was the salvation of the dead, especially the way of salvation for blood relations. Western Pure Land Buddhism in Japan had a doctrine of rebirth through the invocation of Amitabha. Because this doctrine was appreciated by the people, this form of Buddhism spread throughout the country and is still popular in Japan today. Early Christian missionaries were never able to reconcile ancestor worship and the Christian tradition. To this day the problem has not been resolved, and it obstructs the spread of Christianity in contemporary Japan.
Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan

For the most part Christians do not participate in ancestral rituals. In fact the Protestant Church in Japan has a very negative view of ancestral rites. In contrast, the Catholic Church in Japan acknowledges ancestor worship as reverence for the ancestors. It also allows for the use of the Buddhist altar and the Buddhist memorial tablet in the celebration of the mass. In the main, however, non-Christians in Japan hold the view that Christianity has no ancestral rituals. Nevertheless, according to David Reid, in his study of Protestant Christians and ancestor worship in Japan, about 25% of Protestant Japanese Christians have a Buddhist household altar.

The fact that Christian Japanese, whether from households with an ancestral altar or not, attend church, read the Bible, and pray with almost identical frequency will surprise no one. It is surprising, however, to learn that there are striking differences between these two groups of Japanese Christians in the area of culturally expected behaviour.

Reid claims that they differ most from each other in the degree to which they believe in Buddhism alongside Christianity, in the degree to which they think about the dead bon and higan, in household possession of a kami (gods) altar, and in Buddhist mortuary tablets, Buddhist sutras, memorial photographs, and the frequency of visits to family graves. In each of these cases Christians from households with an ancestral altar show a higher participation than Christians from households with no ancestral altar.

Reid, in his study of Christians and ancestors, raises the question of whether or not Protestant Christianity has changed through its contact with Japanese culture.

If the assumption is correct that the Protestantism that first came to Japan was so deeply imbued with the Puritan mentality that it would have nothing to do with ancestral rituals beyond the funeral, it follows that mainline Protestantism as found in Japan today has changed considerably.

Although the Protestant Church in Japan has a negative view of ancestor worship, there still exists a subconscious faith in ancestors for Japanese Christians, and the Christian Church in Japan cannot flatly reject their spiritual longings.
CONCLUSION

When we as Japanese Christians consider the indigenization of Christianity in Japan, it is essential that we examine Japanese traditional thought, particularly ancestor worship. To deny this aspect of spirituality in Japan is to deny one of the deepest means to self-identity among Japanese people. I argue here that Japanese Christians should examine closely their interpretation of Christianity and the process of Japanization. This process is essential if we are to understand how Japanese people think and if we are to find ways to approach them with true Christian theology. Furthermore, we should search for a scheme to establish a more genuine Christian faith for Japanese people. If this quest is neglected, then we shall fail to allow a more authentic indigenization of Christianity to occur in Japan.

Naoko Komuro is an associate professor at Tokyo Woman’s Christian University for Christian Studies. Her main research field is Historical Theology and Missiology with special reference to the indigenization of Christianity in Japan. She holds master’s degrees from Tokyo Union Theological Seminary and Western Seminary in the USA.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 33.
4. Shinto: the indigenous, ancient religious traditions of Japan were formalized and given the name ‘Shinto’ (the way of the gods) when other religions were introduced into Japan in the sixth century.
5. The Edicts of Seclusion, prohibiting Christianity, were promulgated several times in the Edo period.
7. Ibid., pp. 15–16.
11. Ibid., pp. 18–19.
17. Bon is the festival of the dead (Buddhist All Souls’ Day). Higan is the week of Buddhist memorial services centring on the spring and autumn.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


