



2024 History Essay Contest

School High School Winner

The Tragic History of Japanese Christians during the Edo Period (1603-1867)

By Lucia Augdahl
Unity Catholic High School – Burnsville, Minnesota

In the heart of Kyoto, a young man sits cross-legged, polishing a round and rough metal into a beautiful bronze mirror. Akihisa Yamamoto, "The Last Mirror Maker," is the fifth-generation carpenter of a family business called Yamamoto Metal Works, the last business in Japan that handcrafts traditional Japanese mirrors. Founded in 1866 during the end of the Edo period, Yamamoto Metal Works appeared when Japanese mirrors and shops were still prevalent, especially in Kyoto. As the years went on and the rise of modernization came, this family business became the only one that remained open. While it is very impressive that Yamamoto continues to use the traditional techniques, there is something even more impressive about the mirrors he makes.

In 2014, Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan, visited the Vatican and was introduced to Pope Francis and, as is customary, they exchanged gifts. Mr. Abe's gift to Pope Francis was a smooth round plate of metal: a Yamamoto custom-made mirror. On the outside, it appeared to be a normal mirror with beautiful carvings on the back, but as the mirror's front surface hit the sunlight, it reflected a cross onto the wall. The mysterious component of this mirror is known as the "magic mirror phenomenon." The *makyoh* ("magic mirror") stumped even some researchers. Eventually they found an uneven, thin carving

under the polished surface that, when shown with light, will project that image. Though the concept originated from China, Japan was introduced to these mirrors around the Edo period and they became a significant part of Shinto and Buddhist worship. Even so, the mirror that Abe offered was not designed just for the amusement of the pope. Rather, it was a replica of how the mirrors were used in the Edo period by hidden and persecuted Christians in Japan.

On August 15, 1549, a Spanish man by the name of Francis Xavier set foot on Kagoshima, a port city on the tip of a south-western island of Japan named Kyushu, as the first Christian missionary to Japan. As one of the founders of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), he already had experience in evangelizing in a foreign country, having preached in India and Malaysia, and he had great hopes for the dawn of Christianity in another Eastern country. Frankly, his hopes did not seem too implausible; it was the middle of the Sengoku or Warring State period (1467-1568) which was a time of major confusion in sovereignty within Japan. The local daimyo (feudal lords) and samurai clans were in conflict and with the absence of effective leaders it was a great time for a religion to take root and flourish. The Shimazu family, a clan of daimyo who controlled Tanegashima, seemingly received these foreigners to the island warmly, as only six years prior the first Portuguese Europeans had arrived bringing guns, leading to the reproduction of guns in Japan and opportunities for trade. This is a common theme within the history of Christianity in Japan, it was often welcomed due to the fact that Christians were from Europe so they were considered a good opportunity for trade.

In the beginning, the missionaries were having a slow but promising start. The Jesuits preached with translators while also studying Japanese themselves, and were truly impressed with the Japanese. They adapted to many of their customs, but still dealt with language barriers. Western and Eastern thought had some clear differences, and having to express something that didn't have a Japanese word or thought led to some errors within their translations, many words having Buddhist connotations. However, it was a fair start, despite the fact that after only 10 months the Shimazu family had changed their minds about Christians. They prohibited the missionaries from preaching in Kagoshima, so they had to go to other territories to preach. Francis Xavier left Japan around 1551 for his India mission, leaving the

remaining European missionaries and a growing Christian community to continue his work. Beginning in the 1560s, a surge of daimyo even converted, the first being Omuru Sumitada, ruler of a territory in northwestern Kyushu in 1561. He even opened the port Yokese-ura and then the port of Nagasaki to the missionaries. Nagasaki grew from a small settlement into a core of foreign relations. In 1568, the influential and rather ruthless daimyo Oda Nobunaga, the first of Japan's 3 great unifiers, began to be very hospitable to these European Jesuits. Nobunaga's actions were beneficial to the Jesuits in Japan, and vice versa. Although he never converted, by welcoming Christianity he earned better trade with the Portuguese. Another notable daimyo, Otomo Sorin, also showed generosity to the Jesuits in 1551 by welcoming them in his territory, letting them stay in a building for their headquarters and preach. Sorin finally converted in 1578, and in 1582 he even funded the first Japanese embassy in Europe. Though many of the lords who had converted were doing it for political and economic reasons such as trade, the fact that these lords were welcoming the Jesuits or converting made the number of Christian converts higher. Jesuit institutions and schools suddenly grew in the midst of Japan and by 1583 there were hundreds of seminarians who were learning not only the usual European academics such as Latin, theology, and music, but also Japanese literature and practices. This toleration of Christianity throughout Japan resulted in only a few cases of martyrdom, at least before 1587. By then there were about 200,000 Christians in Japan!

In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the successor of Nobunaga, defeated the Shimazu family and finally united all of Japan. With his ruling, suspicion grew about Christianity. While he was curious of Christianity at first, he eventually banned Christians in 1587 fearful of the Christians loyalty to the church and not to a ruler. The edict that he issued, however, was not very well executed, and the Christians discreetly carried on their evangelizing in Japan. In fact, it was around this time that Christians were publishing great literature, demonstrating the great contributions of Christianity to Japanese society. The printing press was introduced to Japan by none other than Japanese Christians. Suddenly translations and even creative Christian works popped up in Japan, and they were not merely works explaining theology. In the ASIANetwork journal, Chris Lough argues, "It [Christian works] made broad use of Japanese

tradition, flowed from a philosophy of education that grappled seriously with Japanese culture, and viewed debate as a feature rather than a bug.” Their works were filled with rich symbolism, and Japanese vocabulary that resonated with the Japanese people, using Buddhist symbols instead of creating confusion to make things easier to understand. In these works we see the great potential of the interaction between Eastern and Western thought and how Christianity could be adopted by a Buddhist and Shinto society and flourish which makes what was to come even more tragic.

While it is true that Hideyoshi's edict was not strictly enforced, atrocities and cases of martyrdom did occur. For example, in 1596 the castilian ship *San Felipe*, was stranded on the coast of Shikoku, The ship's pilot told the island officials “The missionaries come as the King of Spain's advance guard”. Hideyoshi interpreted this as a threat of being colonized. This led to the arrest of 26 Christians, including 12 and 13 year old children, all of whom were eventually crucified in Nagasaki. This gruesome example, however, was not common. Persecutions were isolated cases.

However, after Hideyoshi died in 1598, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the final “unifier” of Japan took his place. This new emperor established himself as Shogun, beginning the Edo period. Edo Japan is known for its great harmony and transition to Modernity. Ironically, as peaceful as the age might have been, it was not so for the Catholics. In 1614 the “Statement on the Expulsion of the Bateren” by Ieyasu, banned Christianity. The great expulsion resulted in European missionaries banished, schools shuttered, Catholics tortured, and even the printing press transported back to Europe. Ieyasu's worries were the same as those of Hideyoshis, the difference being that Ieyasu followed through. In 1612 there were about 300,000 Christians recorded, but by 1625 the number had been reduced to half of that. It became mandatory in 1635 to list themselves at a local Buddhist temple, and if a Christian was discovered, both he and his family would be punished. Christians were to step on *Fumi-e* (images of Jesus or Mary). They were burned, beheaded, and starved. In 1638, the cruel daimyo of Shimabara tortured the peasants, leading to The Shimabara rebellion, known as a Christian revolution in which 37,000 died, most of them Christians. The Shimabara rebellion marked the end of not only the Christians but of all Europeans from Japan.

So what does this have to do with the Japanese mirror? Well, no matter how hard the Tokugawa shogunate tried, they were not able to eradicate Christianity. But it wasn't easy for the Christians that remained in Japan. Due to the harsh persecutions, the remaining Christians had to go underground, becoming known as *Kakure Kirishitan* (hidden Christians). The hidden Christians had to disguise themselves as Buddhists, even having to hold Buddhist funerals. With how much the Christians suppressed their true beliefs in order to protect their family or themselves, how did they continue practicing Christianity? Receiving the Eucharist, reconciliation and other Catholic sacraments and practices were out of the question since they had no clergy. Thus, baptism, the only sacrament that can be performed by lay people, was now the way of being a Christian. Additionally, prayers were passed down, some having to even be masked as Buddhist chants, some remaining in Latin and Portuguese, other translated to Japanese. Prayers like the *Konchirisan* or contrition were quite vital, too, for any guilt that they had caused by camouflaging their faith. But one of the most important and impressive things they did to maintain their Christianity was their art. They disguised the Christian images and symbols in Buddhist art. *Madonnas*, which are Statues of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus, were disguised as *bodhisattva kannon*, and Jesus statues were disguised as *Jizo*, both Japanese deities. Other statues of Buddhas sometimes would hide a crucifix inside a panel of the statue or on the exterior. And then, *Makyoh*, the "japanese magic mirrors," which looked like ordinary mirrors but when sunlight hit the surface, it would reflect a cross or Jesus or Mary on the wall of a Christian home. The fact that all these crafts and works were made by the underground Christians points to the fact that the community was not just scattered people across Japan but a talented and determined community. Ultimately, in 1853 Japan had to open trade with the West. The Tokugawa shogun fell in 1867 leading to a modern Meiji government, and finally after more than two and a half centuries, religious freedom was established in Japan in 1871. Over those centuries, Christianity in Japan almost metamorphosed into a new religion with all the Buddhist and Shinto influence. And while some of the *Kakure Kirishitan* returned to the Catholic Church, others did not. Today, Christianity is a very small minority in Japan (1% of the population).

This story started out with a Makyoh, one of Yamamoto's Japanese mirrors. The "magic mirror" that Mr Abe gave to Pope Francis is a reminder of the ingenuity and courage of the persecuted Japanese Christians of the Edo period. It's a sad remembrance of the past, but also a testament of keeping the faith and hope under almost insurmountable obstacles. There is hope for Christianity to grow in Japan once again. Our Lady chose and blessed the land of Japan in 1973 with the apparition known as Our Lady of Akita! The tragic history of Christians in Japan during the Edo period is not the end of the story. The roots that were planted by St. Francis Xavier so long ago are still alive and little by little a strong Christian tree will grow back again.

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を中心に、地域に根ざした工芸とそれに関わる人々、その周辺にある暮らし、文化、産業の「いま」と「これから」を見つめ伝え、アーカイブしていくためのメディアです、

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