

History of Christianity's Spread and Development in Japan

--An Investigation of the confrontation relationship with “civil religion”

Luna Xiao

The historical and cultural college of Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610065

Keywords: Christianity; Civil Religion; Spread and Development; Confrontation relationship

Abstract: Religion is the spiritual product of human society and the most essential reflection on the spiritual world of a nation. When Christianity was introduced into Japan in the 16th century, it had a tremendous impact for a long time. At the same time, its development has also undergone a bumpy process. In the sturdy Japanese religious structure that consists of the Buddhas, Christianity was regarded as a heresy exiled from the religion. In addition, the influence of “civil religion” at that time made it more difficult for Christianity to infiltrate into the lives of citizens. This paper explores the early development history of Christianity and introduces the strong “civil religion” in modern Japan. Then a comparative analysis to explore the confrontation relationship between Christianity and “civil religion” is conducted.

1. Introduction

The concept of religion in general context has a very short history and is equivalent to the western term of “religion”. Influenced by the long historical Christianity, this term contains an extremely strong awareness of problems related to the inner beliefs of individuals. However, they are customized and institutionalized no matter whether it is the native Japanese Shintoism or late-introduced Buddhism. They do not necessarily require strong personal beliefs; that is, they are not fully in line with Western religious standards.

2. The Spread of Christianity in Japan

Generally speaking, Japanese Christianity includes not only Protestantism, but also Catholicism as well as Orthodox. Tracing back the history, we could find that the first mission to Japan was Catholicism. Although small in scale, the Christianity in Japan, to some extent, had a significant influence. The spread of Christianity in Japan generally went through three periods: propagation period, expulsion and prohibition period, and legal transmission period.

2.1 Propagation Period (1549 -1587)

Christianity is a world religion [1] that met Japan in the late Middle Ages. Francis Xavier was the first preacher who came to Japan and spread it. In 1549, he arrived in Japan by landing on Kagoshima. Until 1551, he actively carried out activities in Kagoshima, Hirudo, and Yamaguchi. The Jesuits that dispatched Xavier, consisting of seven people including Xavier, was represented by the Spanish nobleman Ignatius Loyola. This religious service by men was formally approved by the Pope in 1540, and they actively engaged in activities such as preaching, spiritual exercises, well-being activities, and education for teenagers [2]. The teaching policy of the Japanese Jesuit Society was formulated in accordance with the cultural characteristics of Japanese society then. The preliminary teachings were firstly explained to the unprivileged people of the uncultivated class in an easily understood way, and then the career of nurturing of clergy and the education for young children were devoted to [3] Xavier’s education in Japan, unfortunately, encountered the turmoil of Japanese society. At that time, Politically, the shugo daimyo began to rise; Economically, the mobility of the population increased due to the expansion of urbanization and social interaction; Culturally, the Onin Wars had brought spiritual confusion to the general public [4]. Under this social circumstance, people were anxious to seek spiritual relief. As a result, Catholic believers rapidly

increased. By 1580, the number of churches in Japan had increased to 200, and there were 150,000 Christians. Later in 1612, they had even achieved missionary achievements which the number of baptized people had reached 600,000 [5]. At the beginning of the 17th century, Japan's Christianity reached its peak, when there appeared a saying of "popularity Kirishitan", which was taken as a social force that could not be ignored. In Japan, terms such as "evangelism," "preach," "mission," etc. usually indicate an activity of a religious group, which can be referred in the sources listed in the second edition of *Japanese National Language Dictionary*. The earliest etymological origin of these three words is "preach", which has already appeared in the historical literature of 13th century, and the historical periods of using the words "evangelism" and "mission" are roughly the same, that is, all after the 19th century. Of course, they are not limited to religion but also used to spread and to promote a broader ideological and spiritual culture. A folk religion is a case in point. In Japan, these terms are generally used by foreign religions, among which the most conscious user is Christian. The Christian's contents, evangelism, preach, and mission include the meaning that make the other parties change their religious beliefs. That is, the converts accept the "baptism" and convert to Christianity in public [6]. Afterwards, the Catholic was unfortunately suppressed and hindered by Japan's national Sakoku policy.

2.2 Expulsion and Prohibition Period (1587 – mid 19th century)

Christianity further emphasized the belief of Jodo Shinshu that was combined with the "Ikki Ikko". However, this belief added the rulers' crisis and even they hate for Christians. In addition, the rapid expansion of the influence of Christianity in Japan actually caused the panic of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, he feared that it would jeopardize his own rule and was afraid of "Ikki Ikko" peasants' uprising caused by this religion. Therefore, in 1587, he proclaimed *Letter of Bateren*, and stipulated that the missionaries must leave within 20 days and confiscated the Jesuit's Kyushu territory, including Nagasaki, Momo, and Urami. Faced with the beliefs of the Catholic-faith of God and the equality of all people, the Shogunate repeatedly stressed that "Our country is the kingdom of God, and God is the root of all things." [7] Due to the close relationship between the development of Japanese Christianity and the Nanban trade, the prohibition of Toyotomi Hideyoshi was not thorough. Thus they took a tight-and-loose policy. In the Edo period, the Tokugawa Shogunate practiced a more severe policy of prohibition. Using the "Okamoto Big Eight Incident" as the fuse, from 1612 onwards, they started a new round of probation activities. In 1614, the Tokugawa Shogunate promulgated the "keisho Protestant Order"; thus Christianity was officially banned and persecuted. At that time, Christians accounted for 3.5% of the total population. There were more than 40,000 people that were killed and missionaries that were expelled abroad in this movement. In the following 16 years, the Japanese Catholic was devastatingly destroyed, and 1900 people had been martyred by "Zhe", a sentence to kill people in a sacred way. Other believers had to lurk in underground work [8]. From 1633-1639, the Shogunate issued the "Seclusion Order" for five times, completely rejecting Christianity. Next, Japan entered the era of shakoku.

2.3 Legal Transmission Period (1889 - present)

It was not until 1857 that the Meiji government issued a "five bans". However, the Christian missionary activities became active again because of the western guns that opened the door of Japan. The national policy adopted by Ieyasu mainly aimed at eradicating the influence of Christianity in Japan. Later, when Japanese modern nationalism gradually rose, the shogunate finally lifted the Sakoku policy, which experienced approximately two and a half centuries. Japanese, again, came into contact with Western religion. In 1859, upon the arrival of American missionaries, Christian Protestantism spread to Japan and then was widely developed afterwards. In the early Meiji period, beliefs in Christianity were generally of the gentry youth, who belonged to the "third class" of the middle peasants, rich peasants, and small landlords who abolished the feudal yoke. The reason for that was because Christianity had kept people from maintaining the social order based on the feudal class nature and consciously attached importance to following the internal ethical concept of citizenship; thus it formed a unique Japanese nationalism. In 1873, Japan withdrew the prohibition order of Kirishitan. In 1889, "Freedom of Faith" was written in the "The Constitution of Great

Japanese Empire". Since then, Christianity has been legally guaranteed.

Christianity is an European religion culture that transmitted across more than a half road of the earth and finally landed in Japan. Therefore, Japan has encountered an unprecedented strange foreign culture. Whether it is active or passive, Japan has been thrown into the world's culture. This is not only a religious issue, but also accompanied by material civilization that people can hardly imagine.

3. The Confrontation with “Civil Religion”

Christian culture, along with Western guns and armament, became a powerful weapon for western colonists to open up the Eastern society. Although Christianity has exerted a tremendous influence, this problem became more common after its entrance of modern times. In the sturdy Japanese religious structure consisting of the Buddhas, Christianity was regarded as a heresy and exiled from religion. In addition, the influence of “civil religion” made it more difficult for Christianity to infiltrate into the lives of the citizens.

4. The Existence of “Civil Religion”

Japan is not only an economic power but also a mixture of religions, which holds a huge difference in the number of religious population and actual population. Therefore, it is possible for a person there to have multiple religious beliefs. Since the existent religions is often formalized, they can deal with most of the problems in their lives, even if they do not use its power. The cultural penetration of Christianity, accordingly, becomes difficult. “Suspected religion” is not regarded as a religion, and it strongly suppresses the existing religions with the strength of people’s faith. This is called “civil religion”. In Japan, Christianity gently accepts the challenge of this kind of citizen religion. The reasons for the citizen’s inability to extricate themselves from the shackles given by traditional national spirit is not the lack of enthusiasm for Christianity only. The “civil religion” first appeared in the Eight Chapter of Rousseau's *Social Contract Theory*, in which he says, “Since the establishment of the country, religion has never played a fundamental role” [9]. Religious beliefs play a necessary role in appointing a social contract, establishing and maintaining the development of the country. To realize this faith, he describes the simple doctrines for the civil religion in his articles, which pertains to the existence of God, the after-life, do well and have well, Evil with Evil, and the exclusion of religions intolerance Etc. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “The civil religion is a new concept for evoking the awe of the country and the law and replacing Christian nationality.”

5. The Influence of Christianity in the Formation of Modern Japan

The influence of Japanese modern Christianity, although there are no religious persecutions and opposition from those in power, is greatly weakened. One of the reasons is that modern Japanese people have strong eclecticism but no consciousness of religion. In the Meiji period, when Japan was far behind the world’s civilization, Christianity was regarded as a means of modernization and Europeanization. At that time, Japanese people who were without foreign cultural roots could hardly understand or tolerate Christian culture truly. From the Meiji period to the Heisei period, Christianity became synonymous with fashion and was recognized by the general public.

Nijimanou, a scholar in the early days of Meiji, once said, “In a decade, Japan will become a Christian country”. This proved that the Christianization of Japan in the first half of the Meiji period was still quite optimistic. Until then, the historical mission of the foreign propagandizing teachers seemed to be over. The role of the Meiji Japanese church schools began to change. However, till now, Christianity still has a profound influence on Japanese culture. They include the celebration of human rights thoughts, social recognition of the same rights for both men and women, encouragement for women’s participation in political affairs, the introduction of marriage ceremonies, the implementation of monogamy, the abolishment of the prosecution movement, and

the promotion of higher education for women and so forth. It could be said that the greatest influence of Christianity for Japan lies on its role for the national consciousness, which plays a huge role in the construction of modern countries' morality and the formation of its core values. Simultaneously, Japanese society also has an influence on Christianity. By combining Christianity with nationalism and quintessence, it has brought a number of changes to Christian content.

6. The Main Doctrine of Japanese “Civil Religion”

(1) The moment of fault. Those who have regressed will regard the retrogression as a “fux” (A ceremony of Japanese Shinto. When you are guilty and unclean in humans, wash your body with water). They believe that one day they will return to their original state. They, then, believe that time has the function of self-cleaning, so that they constantly wait for the opportunity of regeneration and resurrection. This is Japan’s “civil religion”. Therefore, the fault is also temporary, and the trouble should be ignored, waiting for the heat to subside.

(2) Consistent continuity. To become a good citizen of Japan, they must pay attention to the longevity of a place or long-term work in a certain job. Therefore, doing something continuously without interruption is considered to be a symbol of diligence, but it may cause constant fatigue; as a consequence, it also leads to an accumulated habit of living more value than the balance in quality. [10]

(3) Drink with friends. Japanese people who work until evening often go to drink with their friends to change their mood. This becomes the “evening religion” for most citizens. This relaxed and happy ceremony helps them to strengthen the harmonious relationship between friends.

(4) Unitary nature of culture. All of political, cultural, and fashionable aspects have become Tokyo-centric.

7. Conclusion

Moreover, in Christian schools, there are also many parents who ask their children not to accept the baptism education. In this case, it can form immunity to Christianity. Next, positive influence of Western civilization will become increasingly rare. Here, I believe that people should hold a cultural relativism attitude and treat the influence of Christianity in both ways. At the same time, we should explore more positive “civil religion” and correctly treat the “civil religion” and Christianity's confrontation relationship.

References

- [1] Christians account for 32.4% of the world's population. In 1900, 0.4% of Christians worldwide were distributed in East Asia and rose to 1.3% in 1980. The holy book was translated into 1811 world languages (1980), and the number of confessionalists reached 20,800, and expanded to 89,000 ethnic groups. World Christianity Encyclopaedia [M], Kyobunkan, 1986 1-4.
- [2] Tutiya haku, Christian Missionary in Japan[J], East Asian Cultural Interaction Research, 2010(7) 83.
- [3] Satokaisin, Sugawararyoko, Iriesiko, Christianity and education in the Meiji era[J], Summary of Nagasaki Wesleyan university Regional Integration Research Institute, 2012(3) 75-76.
- [4] Suzuki han kyuu, Translated by Niu Jianke, Religion and Japanese Society[M], Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2005 50.
- [5] Hirasawa nobuyasu, Education and Christianity in modern Japan[J], 1Jyosetu, Summary of Academic research, Kanoya taiiku university, 1993(9) 80.
- [6] Tutiya haku, Christian Missionary in Japan[J], East Asian Cultural Interaction Research, 2010(7) 77-78.

- [7] Mizuen hyou, The Reorganization of Feudalism and the Establishment of Japanese Society[J], A History of Japan (2), Tokyo, Yamakawa Publishing Company, 1987 153.
- [8] Hirasawa nobuyasu, Education and Christianity in modern Japan[J], 1Jyosetu, Summary of Academic research, Kanoya taiiku university, 1993(9) 80.
- [9] Takayama yuuni, Unfinished ‘Civil Region’- Pierre Leroux and the germination of liberal socialism[J], Annual report politics, 2013 104.
- [10] Obara nobu, The confrontation with ‘Civil Region’[J], Japanese theology, 1990 210.