

**Religious Domestication:  
How Persecution is Re-packaged in Present-day Japan**

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**[ABSTRACT]**

This essay addresses the safety and security issues of Japan by using religion to critique Japan's policy of cultural assimilation. The following delineates the past, present, and future relationships religion plays in public discourse in order to better understand how to proceed with multiculturalism in Japan.

The first part begins by tracing how religion has been dominated by the political rule of Oda Nobunaga, Tokugawa Iesu, Meiji imperialism, and Showa cultural nationalism. Throughout four historical eras this section diagrams how religion has been domesticated by being forced from public debate into the private domain.

The second section focuses on religion within public education to show how Japan's newest immigrants are gradually being assimilated into society through the help of extra-curricular club activities that demand its religious minorities to discard their beliefs as a condition for membership. The disinterest in religious activity has placed pressure on Christian minorities to discontinue their church activities. Through the extraction of church activity the immigrant loses a key location they use to integrate themselves and their children into Japanese society without having to

compromise their identities. The unawareness of Japanese concerning the crucial role church plays in immigrants' societal integration, has led to a new generation of immigrant children growing up without the help of the Catholic community to decipher where minority beliefs should impact the immigrant's life in Japan.

The third and last section shows how the current cultural assimilation upheld in public education obstructs the Japanese from discovering a liberal multiculturalism that promotes a deeper safety and security for its ethnic minority class. Achieving Japanese-style multiculturalism first requires a better understanding of what is wrong with the current homogeneous model. This calls for a bottom up assessment of diversity issues that consider the opinions of immigrants when formulating a multicultural policy. Discovering multiculturalism from the perspective of the immigrant will require Japan to collaborate with private institutions to better empathize with issues of cultural diversity. When concerned with understanding religion and its affects on multiculturalism Japan could benefit from collaborating with the Roman Catholic Church in Japan.

Safety and security is more than the absence of violence, but consists of both bodily protection and ideological wellbeing. In a metropolis as large as Tokyo, the small numbers of crimes committed make Japan the envy of most industrialized countries. Yet behind this physical security exists an ideological oppression that threatens the religious beliefs and cultural expressions of those minorities living in this peaceful country.

This essay examines how the cultural assimilation that exists within contemporary Japanese society is suffocating the innovation of Japan's Filipino-Japanese children by isolating these immigrants from the Catholic community of their Filipino mothers and teaching them that social acceptance into Japanese society requires that they give up their Christian beliefs as a condition to be accepted by their peers. The following describes the past, present and future of religious discourse within Japanese public domain. Throughout these four sections religion and its relationship to Japanese society will expose how within public activity there still remains the threat of a religious persecution long past.

## **1. Domesticating Religion**

Foreigners frequently comment on the contradiction between the abundance of temples, shrines and churches, and the absence of Japanese who profess religious belief (Reader and Tanabe 1998:1). This first section attempts in four parts to deliver the historical background explaining why religion claims such a weak association in Japan. Before this section begins, it is important to remember that until well into the Edo period religion in Japan was not the passive institutions known today, but rather possessed large armies frequently used to influence

territorial disputes. It was not until Oda Nobunaga began to pacify religion through the sword that it slowly became domesticated over a long period of several centuries.

### **1.1. Buddhist Persecution**

Following the period of civil war in the sixteenth century, three new military shoguns by the names of Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Iesu Tokugawa arrived on the political stage. Beginning at the end of Japan's period of civil war came Oda Nobunaga who used a series of skillful tactics to enlarge his fief and form alliances with neighboring nobilities. Despite Nobunaga's strength and his sanction by the emperor he was not without opposition from neighboring families surrounding Kyoto. As a matter of fact, obstinate resistance from neighboring military factions sometimes managed to foil his political plans. Maybe not the strongest, but perhaps one of the most illusive oppositions Nobunaga faced was the threat of Tendai warriors positioned in Enryaku temple located on Mt. Hiei in northern Kyoto. At the time this sect garnered a military stronghold and owned a massive compound with more than 3000 buildings.

Given the tense relationship between Nobunaga and Buddhism, all it took was for Tendai monks to begin taking part in the conquest for feudal supremacy for Nobunaga's anxiety to turn into rage. In 1571, Nobunaga decided he had had enough of the military threat of religion and took 30,000 of his troops up the Kyoto mountainside. So fierce was Nobunaga's assault on Tendai Buddhism that not one of the buildings was left unaffected by flame and few monks were saved from fire and sword (Sansom, 421). The price Tendai Buddhism paid for its dabbling in politics was a message from the shogun that religion would henceforth no longer threaten political rule.

After Nobunaga and his predecessor Hideyoshi, the shogun Iesu Tokugawa managed to unite Japan and maintain public peace for over two centuries. Maintaining this concord required Tokugawa to continue the “no tolerance” policy toward religious militarization Nobunaga began. Public peace was one of Tokugawa’s chief concerns, and for this he tolerated no threats to his authority. Compared with prior periods, Edo was relatively peaceful. But this peace came with the unsaid agreement that religion should never oppose the authority of Tokugawa’s rule.

On one occasion, a new Buddhist sect called Jodo (Pure Land) Buddhism began to take hold with the common laymen. Within this new brand of Buddhism, the followers of Shinran known as Jodo Shin (True Pure Land) Buddhists made Tokugawa especially nervous. This was due to both the swelling Honganji compound in Kyoto and Jodo Shin’s large factions of lay warriors. The Jodo Shin sect did not learn from previous generations to curb their military escapades, and for this they paid dearly. In 1602 Tokugawa took his army and through a deft show of authority demanded that the True Pure Land sect be separated (Sansom, 448). Forced to comply, Jodo Shin Buddhism to this day remains divided into East and West branches as a testimony to the supreme authority political powers have over religion.

## **1.2. Christian Persecution**

In 1549 Frances Xavier brought Christianity to Japan and by 1582 it was reported that he had won the hearts of more than 150,000 Japanese Christians (Sasom 1952:420). Xavier and his fellow Jesuits were initially treated well by Nobunaga, and even though Hideyoshi enacted a ban on Christianity, the weak enforcement of this edict influenced missionary efforts little. The amicable relationship with Christianity continued until cities like Macau and Manila fell to

Portugal and Spanish occupation. Tokugawa believed that it was only a matter of time before the West would turn its military conquests toward Japan. Tokugawa's patience ended with the Shimabara rebellion of 1638 when a group of men, women, and children led by Christian generals rose up against their feudal lord and occupied a dilapidated castle on the Shimabara peninsula. As the last sword fell on these defectors Tokugawa firmly resolved to enforce the Christian ban Hideyoshi first enacted. From 1639 a bloody witch-hunt against Christians continued for more than two centuries and was a vicious consequence for challenging the shogun's authority (Sansom 1952:453-454; Earhart 1982:121).

### **1.3. One Nation Over God**

Politically speaking, little from the period of Edo remained unchanged by the Meiji government. After 1868, political power was now returned from the Bakufu (Tokugawa rule) to the Meiji emperor and Japan was no longer separated into fiefs ruled by daimyos or shoguns but united under a common modern government. Despite these drastic changes, the desire to domesticate religion that began with Nobunaga and was strengthened under Tokugawa continued to influence the rule of the Meiji government. The Meiji emperor, like his predecessors, used myth and ritual hand in hand with his political rule. Japanese historian Joseph Kitagawa calls this policy of rule the "immanent theocracy" of Meiji. According to this idea, "a newly concocted 'non-religion' or 'superreligious' cult of national morality and patriotism was superimposed on nominal constitutional guarantees of freedom and religious belief" (Kitagawa 1966:267). Armed with this religio-political mandate the Meiji government freely gerrymandered the lines between sects erasing and creating new religious institutions at will.

The act of redrawing sectarian lines translated into a vicious political reformation that changed many century-old religions almost overnight. For example, the Meiji restoration began with the ill-famed “Religious Organization Law” that reduced the number of Buddhist sects from fifty-six to twenty-eight, requiring the destruction of thousands of temples and the displacement of tens of thousands of monks. Christianity suffered equally as its thirty-five sects were reduced to one Catholic and one Protestant (Kitagawa 1966:278). The speed at which the Meiji Reformation reversed hundreds of years of religious sectarianism is indicative of the political power institutional religion lacked after centuries of military suppression.

Finally, the last manipulation of the Meiji government was to increase, centralize, and systemize the number of Shinto shrines throughout the country in order to place the emperor’s mythical authority into law (Breen and Teeuwen 2000). In accordance with public pressure surrounding the mounting wars in Asia, all Japanese citizens were required to “pay respect” to the emperor at National Shrines (Nishiyama 2000:45-50) and Christian priests and pastors were dispatched throughout Asia with the intent of spreading the Japanese message of empire (Terada 2003; Hara 1990). The religio-political decisions of the Meiji government were a testament that the long practice of isolating religion to the private sphere had now become part of modern Japan.

#### **1.4. The Authority of Japanese Culture**

The above examples have shown a Japan that has consistently placed religious action under the will of the ruling power. Whether this is medieval Japan with its shoguns or Meiji Japan with its theocratic state, religious institutions have always taken second place to the authority of Japan’s rulers. Even after the defeat of

the Second World War left many Japanese spiritually hollow, most decided to believe in the superiority of Japan and its culture than trust those religious institutions they blamed for the war.

In post-war Japanese society religion's position changed little from the ideological pyramid of Japan's past. After the death of the Showa emperor in 1988 the top of this pyramid was replaced by a "cultural nationalism" that concerned itself with constructing an ethnically homogeneous identity (Yoshino 1997). Notions of cultural superiority were disseminated through teaching the value of Japan's mythical monoethnicity and cultural homogeneity. By the 1980s Japanese had achieved a nationalism fabricated at the expense of forgetting its pre-war past. The disinterest of Japanese in matters of faith has sunk religion to a new depth where it seldom influenced matters of public concern (Lie 2001).<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Public Education versus Private Religion**

The reason for the above journey into Japan's past is the connection this past plays to the present-day. This second section is divided into two parts that connect the idea of religious persecution to the cultural assimilation of the present that is taking place in Japanese public schools. This section shows that Japan continues to limit the domain of religion to the private sector where it has existed for centuries and thus by doing so oppresses the Catholic immigrant who depends on their public expression of faith for survival.

In this section, we are reminded that religion and culture form an inseparable synthesis playing off each other. For this reason, constricting religious beliefs of the Catholic immigrant in society commits a kind of cultural assimilation that accepts the religious minority on the condition that they leave their beliefs at



home. The pressure to conform to Japanese societal norms requires that the immigrant extract their religious beliefs from their public expression. This artificial bifurcation ignores the symbiotic relationship religion plays with culture and forces the immigrant to perform a cultural lobotomy that robs them of their identity (Hall 1996; Lezbetak 1987).

### **2.1. The Game of Religious Assimilation**

When discussing cultural assimilation an important place to begin is with Japanese public education and extra curricular club activities. Membership within club activities requires students to participate for long hours through preparing and planning social events, practices, and games. Club activities monopolize the time of its members both on weekdays, weekends and holidays. This commitment places enormous constraints on the private lives of children.

In Japan, children are given little time for private activity because there is strong societal pressure for students to participate in school, club, and even nighttime cram schools. Because education is a top priority in Japan there exists the assumption that activities such as sports should take precedence over church activity. Religion claims an inferior position because it is seen as a private action, and by this rationale comes after the priority of education. This results in children who learn to place the responsibility of club activity over church activity to repeat this value judgment later in life, thus resulting in church absence.

### **2.2. Isolating Religion to the Private Domain**

In the 1990s a rising number of immigrants from Catholic countries like Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines were called to Japan to fill work labor shortages

(Komai 2000). Many of these migrants have become a new generation of immigrants in Japan.<sup>2</sup> For these immigrants and their children church is more than a mere religious community that meets their spiritual needs. Immigrants depend on the church as a location where parent and child can form relationships between Japanese and immigrant cultures.

In research by the author on the Catholic identity of the Japanese-Filipino family religion played a central role in the identity formation of both Filipino immigrants and their children. The Japanese-Filipino family uses the church to teach their child about native customs, beliefs, and language, and to integrate themselves into their Japanese community (Ogsimer and Gatapan 2008; Foley and Hoge 2007). In addition, the Filipino-Japanese child also uses church as a liminal space where they can discover how their cultural and religious minority views fit into Japanese society. Bicultural children use the ethnic diversity of the Catholic community to make friends with similar ethnic backgrounds as their own. Through interacting with fellow bicultural children the Filipino-Japanese child receives support that is essential to their identity formation.

The social significance the church plays in the lives of immigrant and bicultural child is being threatened by the pressure to join club activity. The connection between the pressure to join after school activities and to leave the church is characterized by the following interview with a young Filipino-Japanese boy by the name of Hiroyuki (17). In this interview Hiroyuki mentioned how he made some of his best friends within his church youth group, and how Sunday was his favorite day of the week. Despite his strong association with his church community, it was impossible for Hiroyuki to continue church attendance after he joined the basketball team. During this period, Hiroyuki became so busy with sports that he could not

attend church for over a year (Hiroyuki Interview 2008).

Hiroyuki's experience is quite common within the lives of Filipino-Japanese children. In fact, in over thirty interviews with Japanese-Filipino children conducted within the Catholic Tokyo Archdiocese all respondents commented on missing church for club activity, while not one child mentioned missing club activity for church. The comments of Hiroyuki and other Filipino-Japanese children prove how Japan is assimilating its immigrant population by requiring its religious minority to abandon their private beliefs before being accepted in public. Japan requires its children to participate in school activities for such long periods that little time is left for them to participate in other activities as essential as community involvement, religious activity, or time with one's family.

### **3. Implementing Liberal Multiculturalism**

This last section proposes the need for Japan to embrace a policy of liberal multiculturalism to replace its present cultural assimilation. This is achieved in two parts. The first part reviews the multiculturalism that currently exists in Japan and followed by some predictions of Japan's future supposing this trajectory does not change. This section closes with an alternative view of multiculturalism Japan could benefit from implementing. The second section considers the Roman Catholic Church in Japan (RCCJ) as a potential player that could help Japan empathize with the immigrant and create a liberal multiculturalism that considers the position of its ethnic minority.

#### **3.1 Embracing Liberal Multiculturalism**

The religious subordination from Japan's past affects the present by

suppressing the cultural expressions of the Filipino-Japanese child by pitting the public activity of extra curricular clubs against the private practice of religious worship. If Japan is to continue its policy of globalization and dependency on foreign labor it will need to reconsider its closed-door policy toward migrants and adopt a new multicultural model to keep up with its ethnically diversifying population (Haffner 2008).

In his essay on religious minority rights of Muslims in Europe, Hellyer classifies multiculturalism into two types: 1) The multiculturalism that guarantees the right to assimilate to the majority/dominate culture in the public sphere; and tolerate “difference” in the private sphere alone, and 2) the one that guarantees the right to have “difference” recognized and supported in public and private spheres (Hellyer 2006:332). According to this simplified understanding of multiculturalism, Japan currently practices the first brand that limits minority cultures like Christianity to practice their beliefs in private. This essay argues that Japan needs to change its policy to Hellyer’s second model in order to meet the demands of Japan’s ethnically diverse population.

Japan currently accepts migrants for the labor they provide, yet shows little tolerance toward ideas of permanent settlement. Japan discourages immigration because it believes ethnic diversity threatens national unity and identity (Castle and Miller 1998:13). Taking into account countries with similar assimilation policies as Japan, the stricter assimilation policies countries adopt, the greater the possibility immigrants will form ethnic communities and ghettos to insure their cultural safety (Brazal 2008). Moreover, the present xenophobia produced from its closed-door policies can lead future children of immigrants to retaliate against being victimized by racial discrimination (Gans 1992). The anxiety

immigrants feel toward Japan's assimilation policy could become a serious problem that results in ethnic backlash and violence (Weiner 1995:67).

In his work on multiculturalism in Asia, Kymlicka outlines a model called "liberal multiculturalism" that could help Japan avoid the impending cultural clashes between Japanese and its foreign population. According to this view,

[Nation] states should not only uphold the familiar set of common civil, political, and social rights of citizenship that are protected in all constitutional liberal democracies, but also various group-specific rights or policies that are intended to recognize and accommodate the distinctive identities and aspirations of ethnocultural groups (Kymlicka 2008).

Applying this definition to Japan's religious minority would require public schools to offer minorities more freedom to express their beliefs both in public and private. Extending to foreigners the ability to have their views recognized in public would be just the olive branch Japan needs to offer its minority population to ease their growing angst against Japanese current foreign policy.

### **3.2. Beginning with the Roman Catholic Church in Japan**

Replacing Japan's cultural assimilation with a liberal multiculturalism will require a holistic approach that collaborates between public and private sectors to enact greater tolerance toward the free expression of religious activity. Taking into account the high level of religious disassociation that characterizes Japan's contemporary age, few Japanese are able to understand the strong feelings of

immigrants toward church activity and the comfort religious organizations provide its members. Therefore, in order to prevent unnecessary conflict between Japanese and minority groups Japan needs to better understand its current cultural policies from the side of the immigrant by asking for outside help.

In order to empathize with its immigrant population Japan could benefit from cooperating with private organizations that have experience in multicultural matters. One such organization is the RCCJ. Given over three decades of working with foreigners the RCCJ could give the Japanese government advice on how to work in partnership with its immigrant population. Currently, the RCCJ is active in multicultural issues through supporting international centers like the Catholic Tokyo International Center and the Center for Migrants, Refugees and People on the Move. With the help of these centers the Archdiocese of Tokyo has succeeded in hosting certain events like an annual archdiocesan-wide music concert for Filipino Catholics, a multicultural youth camp for bicultural children and children from non-Japanese backgrounds, and a multicultural family day that cooperates with thousands of foreigners living in and around Tokyo. Through collaborative efforts with the RCCJ, the Japanese government could better discover a multiculturalism that guarantees the acceptance and promotion of cultural diversity for all those living in Japan.

## **Conclusion**

There exists a value differential between Japanese and many of the Catholic immigrants raising their families in Japan. Whereas the Japanese value public activities like study and club participation over private activities like religion, most Catholics would consider this hierarchy somewhat ridiculous, if not down right

blasphemous. The inferior position many Japanese attribute to religion complicates how they relate to foreign cultures because it prevents them from understanding how immigrants use religion to integrate themselves into Japanese society. Currently, the Japanese education system with its importance on cultural conformity is pulling immigrant children away from the liminal space found within the RCCJ into a social group where conformity, not acceptance, is valued. Finding themselves away from both bicultural and Filipino peers the Filipino-Japanese child soon loses the connections with their mother's country and with this loss also the identity that makes them unique.

Japan needs to end its practice of cultural assimilation and promote the diversity immigrant children symbolize. If Japan continues to require the cultural conformity of its immigrant population, this generation of bicultural children might lose their cultural advantage and find that the denial of themselves has led to a host of problems this country has no experience for which to deal.<sup>3</sup> Japan's innovative next generation will require its society to collaborate with the private sector in order to create a liberal multiculturalism that fits the Japanese context. Borrowing the knowledge from organizations like the RCCJ could lend to a more holistic multiculturalism that guarantees the safety and security of all the cultures that exist within this island country.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a 2009 NHK survey 82 percent of Japanese preferred the term “non-religion” when asked about their feelings toward religion. This statistic epitomizes a society that has relegated religion to such an inferior position that few associate with it outside those customs that require its involvement. NHK Survey 2009, “Nihonjin no Ishiki Chōsa 35 Nen no Kiseki” (A survey on the traces of 35 years of Japanese Conscience), cited in *Gekann Nihongo* (August 2009): p.46.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise assessment of the Catholic communities of these immigrants see the special issue on migrants and the Catholic Church in Japan. *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies*, 26 (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Hall and Hagiwara show that bicultural children forced to assimilate to the host culture frequently exert poor test scores, depression and low self-esteem (Hall 1996; Hagiwara 2008)