

# From Explicit Proscription to Tacit Proscription: Christianity in Japan

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## Introduction

Christianity in Japan has long been the subject of significant examination in discussions of mission and evangelism. It is a country that has an extensive and complex history of eluding the attempts of missionaries to introduce and reinforce Christian teachings until the Holy Spirit guides the Japanese individual or assembly to experience a spiritual conversion.<sup>1</sup> Despite the activity of missionaries and hidden Christians for over 500 years, Christianity in Japan is reflected in only 1–2% of the population.<sup>2</sup>

Japan's resistance to readily accepting Christianity as necessary or inherently beneficial can partly be explained by the historical precedents of proscription surrounding mission activity. Japan experienced several distinct periods of explicit proscription of Christianity or Christian activity, including the Tokugawa period from 1614–1873, when all of Christian activity was banned, a short period of time in 1868–1873, when Christianity was constitutionally allowed, but missionary activity was banned, and in the years preceding and during World War II, when Christian church activity was severely restricted.<sup>3</sup> During the strictest periods of enforcement of these policies, consequences for engaging with Christianity included persecution, imprisonment, torture, and/or even systematic execution.<sup>4</sup>

## Conditions of proscription

While the current Japanese constitution guarantees the free expression of religion,<sup>5</sup> David Lu suggests that a phenomenon he calls “invisible proscription” is at work in Japan. This phrase is interesting because the two terms seem to be dichotomous, since *invisible* means *unseen* and *proscription* means *written before*, and is largely interpreted as something akin to a written decree of forbiddance. Lu's choice of words speaks to the historical precedents, confusing laws, and implicit expectations that surround religious observance that have been part of the fabric of Japanese culture for centuries. In the context to which Lu is referring, the term “proscription” implies a broader definition than simply the outright or explicit banning or forbidding of certain activities or beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

Characterized as “cultural warfare,” Lu suggests that invisible proscription “comes in the form of secularism and nihilism,”<sup>7</sup> and uses the recent societal pressure to embrace political correctness as an example of invisible proscription:

“The left and the politically correct's pitches are softer and subtler. They do not bark at you. They do not threaten people who do not join them with Armageddon, or engage in murder and mayhem. Instead they inundate the airwaves, television, mass media, and even manga and anime for children to offer worthless entertainment to implant in the youths values that are not normally accepted. . . Their next step is to shame those who do not subscribe to these new

values.”<sup>8</sup>

Lu’s example illustrates that while the term *proscription* typically means forbidden, or banned, it can also be used to communicate a tightly restrictive state, where the freedom to do or believe something is obstructed by written or unwritten rules or cultural expectations. In Japan, those who hear the gospel but remain non-committal about taking a step in the direction of accepting Christian faith are not simply avoiding peer pressure or showing a flippant disregard for the religion. The ramifications for non-adherence to tacit proscriptions are very serious, with the high probability of irrevocable disruption of cultural norms, such as a relational banning within the family, being viewed with disdain for accepting “the other,” or heavy political or financial ramifications, as is often the case with those in government positions.<sup>9</sup>

In his discussion, Lu precedes the term “proscription” with the word *invisible*. The use of the word *invisible* may be misleading for use in Lu’s argument, as it implies a concept of the proscriptions as being imperceptible. Use of the word *tacit* better illustrates the intended point of communicating a certain belief, expectation, or understanding that needs no explanation, written or otherwise. The term *tacit* better exemplifies the nuance that there are unspoken rules, norms, and expectations that are built into the culture. These rules are enforced in a variety of ways, but mainly within public discourse or government practices, family tension, and education.

Public discourse about mixing the role of Shintō with politics has occurred every year since 2001, when Prime Minister Koizumi made a controversial visit to Yasukuni Shrine. At that time and since then, when politicians in high-ranking positions attend (at public expense) the Yasukuni Shintō shrines where war criminals are laid to rest, public funds are used to make monetary and other physical offerings. This brazenly outward mixing of religion and politics, while explicitly forbidden in the Constitution, has generated fury both within Japan and in other geographical regions where tensions about wartime atrocities remain as fresh wounds.

Another means of enforcement is through family ostracization, as is common when one member of a family becomes Christian. This well-documented phenomenon continues to be a point of contention in families, whether it is a situation of an eldest son not being able to carry out his filial responsibilities for caring for the *butsudan* or whether it is a college student who attends a Christian college and decides to become baptized into the Christian faith. Many iterations of ostracization can occur, but the consistent tenet is simply that the member of the family who chooses Christianity is somehow no longer contributing to the collective peace in the family and tension ensues. Extreme forms of ostracization can mean being unaccepted as a member of the nuclear family, which is understandably a devastating emotional and social blow.

While education officials claim that religion is separated from public schools, policies, activities, and curricula continue to uphold both Buddhist and Shintō religious overtones. Requiring teachers to stand and sing the national anthem, the lyrics of which are clearly praising the emperor as a divine spiritual being, was recently found (2011) in the Supreme Court to be constitutional. National holidays of Buddhist and Shintō origin, such as Obon, Showa Day, the Emperor’s birthday, Setsubun, Spring and Fall Equinox are all times in the calendar year where religious origins are both taught and valued as times to secure the Japanese identity and moral code.

In the case of Christianity in Japan, enforcement of proscription no longer happens within the legal system, but it is clearly operating at the cultural and societal level. To this end, the expression *tacit proscription* is a more appropriate phrase to describe this phenomenon. As secularism and nihilism quietly write the rules for cultural norms in Japan and elsewhere, those who are interested

in remaining faithful to the gospel and simultaneously wish to see Japan flourish culturally, understanding the nuances of this discussion are of critical import. Let us now turn our attention toward the variety of ways in which Christianity has experienced proscription both explicitly and tacitly throughout history.

### Historical explicit proscription against Christianity

In 1549, just as the Protestant Reformation was underway in Europe, Jesuit priest Francis Xavier arrived on the shores of a newly re-unified Japan after what had been several centuries of civil war. Xavier's presence was the first known contact with a Christian person and with the doctrine of Christianity for the people of Japan, and he was initially viewed with curiosity more than hostility.<sup>10</sup> The teachings of the Christian faith, particularly the idea of original sin, a single authoritative divinity, and self-sacrifice were in striking contrast to those spiritual teachings that were embedded at the time, including the somewhat rationalistic Confucianism, the vague idealism of Buddhism, and the optimism of Shintō.<sup>11</sup>

Earning favor with many high-level *daimyō*,<sup>12</sup> Christianity enjoyed several decades of significant proliferation. However, this favor was short-lived, and the idea of allegiance to a single God above the emperor became perceived as a menacing threat. After centuries of civil war and a delicate structure of central government, the leaders of Japan did not wish to risk allowing a potentially subversive force to disrupt the long-awaited period of harmony.<sup>13</sup> In 1587, an edict was issued by the *in situ* leader of Japan, Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-1598) that called for the expulsion of all missionaries and the cessation of all mission activities.<sup>14</sup> Several decades of heavy persecution, including systematic torture and executions, followed for those who had become Christian during the time of mission activities.<sup>15</sup> In 1612, the following words were posted in Nagasaki: "No one is allowed to become a follower of the padre [referring to the Catholic priests and missionaries]. Offenders shall be severely punished."<sup>16</sup> Finally, Tokugawa Hidetada (1581-1632), having declared himself shōgūn,<sup>17</sup> declared the following, cinching the legal end of Christianity in Japan<sup>18</sup>:

"Christians have come to Japan, not only sending their merchant vessels to exchange commodities, but also longing to disseminate an evil law and to overthrow right doctrine so that they may change the government of the country and obtain possession of the land. This is the germ of great disaster and must be crushed. These [missionaries] must be instantly swept out, so that not an inch of soil remains to them in Japan on which to plant their feet, and if they refuse to obey this command, they shall pay the penalty."

Following this decree, orders were issued to eradicate Christianity in its entirety. For the next 300 years, Christians and any expression of Christian faith were explicitly banned by the authorities of Japan, thus creating formidable legal barriers for Christianity to continue. When Japan opened the political doors in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, a major shift was already occurring in religious institutions. The frenzied revival of Shintō as a national cult dealt a blow to competing Buddhist temples, and missionaries were allowed in the country, albeit not particularly welcomed. "Initially, attacks on the Christians were restrained, presumably because of fear of European and American retaliation."<sup>19</sup> Protests and unrest, often violent, resulted in pressure from foreign governments, and in 1889 the new Constitution gave Christian mission organizations the green light to engage in mission activities.<sup>20</sup>

## Current tacit proscriptions

Contemporary Japan (post-World War II) is culturally characterized primarily by the influence of a tripartite harmony of other faith systems: Shintō, Buddhism, and Confucianism.<sup>21</sup> Together, they pervade all aspects of Japanese culture, despite the inherent doctrinal contradictions and practical dissensions. Christianity, however, is still considered an “outside” religion, despite attempts to indigenize it and efforts to proclaim the gospel in various capacities that make it more accessible for post-modern Japanese listeners. Following the development of the constitution in 1889 and the new constitution post-World War II, the phenomenon of tacit proscription of Christianity developed. While people were free, legally, to believe or practice Christian faith, deeply rooted institutions and tacit expectations for conformity to those systems continued. Two of those institutions include 1) the existence of State Shintō and 2) the heavy reliance on Buddhist temples for funerary practices and for maintaining family records, resulting in major financial burdens for individuals or families who attempt to separate.

One example of tacit proscription includes government behaviors around Shintō that outwardly (written in the Constitution) communicate that Shintō is not a State-sponsored institution, but tacitly point toward the opposite when government officials model behaviors antithetical to the spirit of the Constitution, deeply influencing public attitudes about where national allegiance and concept of identity ought to lie. A second tacit proscription is built into the perceived disruption of harmony which runs so deeply in the hearts of Japanese people that wavering from the cultural path seems unthinkable. This fear is exemplified in funerary practices as well as spiritual mysteries of the afterlife and repercussions related to the understanding of ancestors and karma. Without a definitive Christian spiritual and theological stance on this sensitive topic that allows for the simultaneous practice of Christian faith while holding a space that respects the cultural practices that are meaningful for their family, the likelihood of Christianity being recognized more widely as being able to take significant root within Japanese culture is slim. This is extremely difficult because of the slippery slope toward syncretism, and is a major issue that can and should be addressed in a separate discussion.<sup>22</sup>

For the prospective Christian who has hopes for being an incarnational witness or explicitly proclaiming the gospel in Japan, the implications for understanding these two powerful venues for tacit proscription against Christianity are enormous. The existence of tacit or invisible proscription against Christianity means that simple proclamation of the gospel in church or other evangelistic settings will likely not be enough to permeate the spiritual fabric of Japan or even be viewed as a legitimate option for spiritual practice at the individual level. These proscriptions are embedded in family relationships, work-related capacities, and even postmodern secularism that dismisses all forms of religiosity. The conversation is difficult, but necessary, and highly relevant for those who wonder how to best serve in a missional capacity while being faithful to the gospel, showing compassion for God’s people, and allowing the rich cultural heritage of Japan to flourish.

## State Shintō

*Shintō*, meaning “Way of the gods,” is the longest existing religion in Japan, originating long before Buddhism arrived in Japan in the sixth century.<sup>23</sup> A pantheistic religious form that combines

both naturalism and supernaturalism, Shintō “is fundamentally not so much a religious system as a complex of ancient beliefs and observances which have remained comparatively unchanged through the vicissitudes of history.”<sup>24</sup> Shintō currently fills another role in Japan, enmeshed in government. Stemming from the intention to conflate the sovereignty of the emperor and the deity of the Sun-goddess, Shintō has long been associated with the central government.<sup>25</sup> It was only recently when, after World War II, the deification of the emperor was abolished through the unconditional surrender to U.S. military forces.<sup>26</sup> Yet, knowing how deeply embedded Shintō religion was in Japanese culture, General MacArthur allowed the symbolic continuation of the emperor lineage system to continue, with the stipulation that there would be no conflation with government activities.<sup>27</sup>

However, beginning in the 1980’s and in the years since, the Japanese government has been seeking to strengthen a sense of nationalism in order to reclaim a sense of identity.<sup>28</sup> Annual visits of Prime Ministers and government officials to the Yasukuni Shintō Shrine, where deceased soldiers—including convicted war criminals—are deified for their service in World War II are worshiped. These official visits “exacerbate fears of a resurgent State Shintō and a new militarism.”<sup>29</sup> Without a national identity under Shintō, Japan has “vigorously pursued the goals of secularization and democratization,”<sup>30</sup> leaving a spiritual vacuum that has been appeased largely by economic growth and materialism. Furthermore, if prominent members of the government continue to observe public Shintō rituals and claim them as integral to Japanese identity, Japanese citizens’ ability to choose another religious path without implying a lack of patriotism is diminished. It is clear that the divide between Shintō and government practice is far from separate, and that the tacit understanding in leadership is that Shintō is the way to extract a true Japanese identity, relegating Christianity to a religion for those who are not willing to fully identify as Japanese.

## Funerary Buddhism

Buddhism is perhaps the most familiar of the faith systems in Japan, having been introduced to Japan by the year 522.<sup>31</sup> The deep and penetrating philosophies of Buddhist teachings “were a marvelous revelation to a people who knew only how to invoke deities conceived as not very much superior to mankind.”<sup>32</sup> For over four centuries, Buddhist temples have been keeping detailed records for families. This was originally in adherence to edicts issued in the Tokugawa era that mandated such census and oversight of populations.<sup>33</sup> Now, however, while there is no written mandate to remain registered with a temple, financial and spiritual penalties that are assessed upon those who choose to separate from a temple have made severance from temple association prohibitive.

For contemporary Japanese, Buddhism is more than a means toward enlightenment for a select few who choose to study it in depth. Buddhism “deals with, and caters to, the needs of a wider populace,”<sup>34</sup> specifically in the rituals and practices surrounding death. Thus, it is common to refer to the practice of Buddhism in Japan “Funerary Buddhism,” as it is primarily on those occasions when the services of Buddhist temples and personnel are rendered. The interrelationship of having to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the deceased and their families, coupled with limited additional roles and high expenses for maintaining ancient temples in contemporary society, means that the costs of funeral-related services are exorbitant. “Today, over 90% of all funerals in Japan are Buddhist and the majority of temples derive their economic support and social authority from providing funerals, maintaining family graves on temple grounds, and conducting yearly memorial

services. More than three quarters of all Japanese confirm that their main reasons for visiting a temple are to take part in mortuary or memorial rites.”<sup>35</sup> In 2006, the average cost for a funeral was well over \$12,000US,<sup>36</sup> with over half of the expense related to Buddhist “offerings,” or upgraded posthumous names (*called daimyō*) “to assure a better life in the next transmigration...The higher the rank [of the *daimyō*], the better it would be to assure salvation for the departed.”<sup>37</sup> This transactional religiosity holds deep parallels to the pre-Reformation Catholic Church practices of indulgences but is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

For a family to refuse to abide by the Buddhist teachings for funerary rites, they are prohibited by the temple from being able to be buried with their families or carry on the traditions associated with paying respects to honor their loved ones.<sup>38</sup> Whether or not a Japanese person believes in Buddhist doctrine, because of the necessity of employing Buddhist temples to provide funerary rites in Japan, the need to maintain financial ties for spiritual reasons is compulsory. The prohibitive (financial) and divisive (spiritual) nature of these practices characterize the tacit proscription for an individual to convert to Christianity, if for no other reason than to maintain peaceful co-existence with both the living family members and the hope of being buried with ancestors upon death.

## Conclusion

Christianity in Japan has endured long periods of explicit proscription, with the most overt and long-standing period occurring between 1600 and 1879. Despite constitutional amendments that have rendered Christian practice legal, there continue to be barriers to the receptivity to Christianity. Examples of such barriers are often tacit, whereby the written and legal definitions say one thing, but general practice and the models of important public figures communicate something that opposes the written documents. Government agencies and individuals who model and propagate State Shintō practices, along with the requisite Buddhist funerary services are evidence that Japanese culture and the mechanisms therein are continuing to tacitly proscribe Christianity.

## 注

- 1 Mark Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 12.
- 2 United States Department of State. 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Japan, 2. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/japan/>
- 3 Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion: With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963), 364-5.
- 4 Samuel Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity: Why is Christianity Not Widely Believed in Japan?* (The Netherlands: Foundation University Press, 2014), 23.
- 5 Mark Mullins, “Background Documents: Constitution of Japan, Article 20,” in *Religion & Society in Japan* (United States of America: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 1993), 104.
- 6 David J. Lu, *Overcoming Barriers to Evangelization in Japan* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), 73.
- 7 Ibid, 75.
- 8 Ibid, 77.
- 9 Ian David Miller, “Choosing the Other - Conversion to Christianity in Japan,” PhD diss. (University of Manchester, 2010), 9-10.

- 10 Anesaki, 241.
- 11 Ibid, 242.
- 12 Daimyō were high ranking military officers in Japan who served as feudal lords between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They often owned large areas of land and employed samurai to guard their land.
- 13 Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig, *Japan: Tradition and Transformation* (St. Leonard's: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd., 1989), 80.
- 14 Carolyn Bowen Francis and John Masaaki Nakajima, *Christians in Japan* (New York: Friendship Press, 1989), 9.
- 15 Lee, 23.
- 16 Adriana Boscaro, "Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the 1587 Edicts Against Christianity." *Oriens Extremus* 20, 2(1973), 226.
- 17 A *shōgun* was largely considered the head-of-state in Japan from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, although the emperor was technically the first in command. A *shōgun*'s responsibilities were primarily military, but diplomacy and governance were also necessary duties for men in these positions.
- 18 Shimizu Hirokazu, *Kirishitan Kankei Hōsei Shiryō Shu* (Tōkyō: Sōkyushuppan, 2002), 285.
- 19 James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 1031.
- 20 Anesaki, 347.
- 21 Heisig et al, 1030.
- 22 For further reading about this topic, see Samuel Lee's book, "The Japanese and Christianity," 95–100. Here, the author introduces several theories that Japanese Christian theologians are discussing as possible indigenous alternatives that maintain the authenticity of the gospel and advocate a strong biblical theology. Presently, however, no systematic or missional theology provides such a doctrine for Japanese Christianity.
- 23 Anesaki, 20.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Barry Wood, "The Japanese Imperial Cult," in *Invented History, Fabricated Power: The Narrative Shaping of Civilization and Culture* (London: Anthem Press, 2020), 83.
- 26 Mullins, "Background Documents," 102.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Peter Takayama, "The Revitalization of Japanese Civil Religion," in *Religion & Society in Modern Japan*, edited by M. Mullins, S. Shimazono, and P. Swanson (United States of America: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 1993), 112.
- 29 Takayama, 117.
- 30 Ibid, 119.
- 31 Anesaki, 52.
- 32 Ibid, 53.
- 33 Lu, 31
- 34 Ian Reader, "Buddhism as a Religion of the Family: Contemporary Images in Sōtō Zen," in *Religion & Society in Japan*, edited by M. Mullins, S. Shimazono, and P. Swanson (United States of America: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture), 1993.
- 35 Mark Rowe, "Death, Burial, and the Study of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism," *Religion Compass* 3 (1) January 2009: 18.
- 36 Yano Research Institute, Japanese Economy Division, "Industrial Report: Trends in the Japanese Funeral Industry," *JETRO Japan Economic Monthly*, February 2006.
- 37 Lu, 34-35.
- 38 Ibid, 30.

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