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THE JAPANESE MARTYRS

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Of all the stories I am telling in this series on atrocities in the early modern age, this one is the least remembered, at least in this country, and a strange, twisting story it is too. We know about the age of global exploration, the age of Columbus and Magellan, of Cortes and Pizarro, the brutal colonisation of the Americas by Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century; and we also know that that is a religious as well as a political story, bringing Catholicism to the New World on the point of a sword. But we know much less about the spread of Catholicism during the same era in the Old World, as the missionaries sent out by the Catholic religious orders travelled with and forged ahead of the soldiers and traders. We could tell the very contrasting stories of the missions to the kingdom of Kongo, in west Africa, or to imperial China. But our focus today is Japan.

The Jesuits, properly speaking the Society of Jesus – and the mix of modesty and assertiveness contained in that blunt title is very characteristic – were a religious order founded in 1534 by the Spaniard and former soldier Ignatius Loyola, an order which from the beginning had a single-minded dedication to missionary work. Four years after the order's foundation, in 1538, the Portuguese king asked the Jesuits to come to his burgeoning trading empire in the Indian Ocean and spread the gospel there. Ignatius' colleague Francis Xavier, another Spaniard, was first to answer the call, eventually setting out in 1541. It is worth emphasising that embarking for the Indies as a missionary in the 1540s was not something to do on a whim: even the voyage was fantastically dangerous. Reaching the Far East took the best part of a year, at best, most of it confined to a tiny ship eating meagre supplies and eking out the stagnating fresh water. Xavier believed when he set out that this was a one-way ticket: he never expected to return to Europe, and indeed he never did. His first stop was the Portuguese foothold at Goa, in western India, where he set about trying to win converts, but quickly ran into political problems: the Portuguese had a rather more coercive notion of how to conduct a mission than he did. He left India in 1545 for the Spice Islands of Malacca, but he was already aware that there were a pair of other societies in East Asia which drew his attention: complex, sophisticated, wealthy, militarily powerful societies which dominated the region, societies which even the most self-satisfied Europeans of the age recognised as their equals in civilisation, and which by most measures were in fact plainly more advanced: China and Japan. Xavier and the Jesuits were drawn to them like moths. Xavier would in fact die of a fever in China in 1552, but first of all he went to Japan, where from 1549 to 1552 he established the first Catholic mission.

Two things made entry to Japan relatively easy at this date. First of all, surprisingly for an island nation, it was not at this date a significant maritime power. The Portuguese, who by now were the shipping workhorses of East Asia, were therefore able to use trade with Japan as a foothold for other ventures. Second, Japan was at this date in some political turmoil. It was formally speaking a single empire covering the islands of Honshu and Kyushu – the northern island of Hokkaido was not brought fully into the empire until the nineteenth century – but the emperor had long been a revered figurehead, with real power held by shoguns, in effect military dictators ruling in the emperor's name. But after a disputed succession to the shogunate in 1477 this system broke down, with the feudal lords of each locality, the so-called daimyos, asserting their independence. In this context, when the Portuguese showed up selling, amongst other things, that newfangled contraption the musket, they found plenty of eager customers.

Arriving in this context, Xavier had a strategic choice to make. The conventional missionary approach in hostile territory was to start at the margins: to look for oppressed, voiceless or powerless groups, for whom Christian talk of justice for the poor and spiritual equality would have an appeal. There were excellent reasons of high principle for doing this; it was also a good way to get quick results. Xavier and his handful of assistants chose a different, more ambitious strategy. They did not want Christianity in Japan to be a religion of the marginalised and the despised, but a religion of the people as a whole; and that meant working through the structures of power. Xavier initially tried to reach the Emperor and the shogun in Kyoto, but slowly became aware that they had no real power to match their titles. Instead, the mission would for now depend on the local daimyo, persuading them either to become Christians themselves or at least to permit Christian preaching in their territories. That meant respecting Japanese ways, a project which meant much more than just learning the Japanese language. It meant asserting the cultural and intellectual credibility of Christianity in scholarly, conservative culture generally suspicious of foreign learning. And it meant some radical adaptation. For example, Xavier had taken a vow of poverty as a Jesuit, and in Europe visible, apostolic poverty was part of the Society's moral authority, but he now recognised that in Japan that moral authority simply did not obtain. So he and his fellows dressed as wealthy Japanese scholars and presented themselves as foreign dignitaries bearing valuable gifts to the daimyo of Yamaguchi, Ouchi Yositaka. In 1551 he gave the Jesuits permission to preach in his dominions; he also gave them the use of a Buddhist temple.

That last detail was no accident. Buddhism was a substantial minority religion in contemporary Japan, and a controversial one. During the era of civil war, many Buddhist monasteries had become in effect independent military powers, and for daimyo who were attempting to consolidate their local control, the Buddhists were a threat. The Jesuits offered the possibility, not only of a direct line to the Portuguese and to firearms, but also of a counterweight to the Buddhists. And what harm could come from letting this handful of eccentric foreigners teach their religion?

At least, that is the cynical way of seeing it. But that will not do, because it is vital for this entire story to understand that Japanese Christianity was never merely a tactical political entity. Real converts, converts of persuasion and conviction, were already being made. Take the man whom we know only by the name he chose on his conversion, Irmao Lourenço, the first Japanese to actually become a Jesuit brother himself. Lourenço, who was virtually blind, was a travelling minstrel who was converted by Xavier himself and now seamlessly added Christian evangelism to his repertoire; it was one of the first signs that Catholicism was genuinely going to put down roots in early modern Japan.

Xavier left Japan in 1551, but others stayed to continue the work. A turning point, both promising and ominous, came in 1562, when for the first time, a daimyo, Omura Sumitada of Yokoseura, was actually converted and baptised. He promptly embarked on a purge of Buddhist worship from his territory, burning temples and destroying statues, despite Jesuit urging to the contrary. It was a sign of what was to follow, thanks to the most extraordinary political figure in sixteenth-century Japan, the daimyo Oda Nobunaga, from Owari province in central Honshu. In 1568, he successfully installed a new shogun following the murder of his predecessor and emerged as the country's most powerful military leader. Nobunaga was no Christian, but he was ferociously anti-Buddhist, and well understood the principle about my enemy's enemy. In the same year, 1568, he extended formal privileges to the Jesuits. During the 1570s, Nobunaga's power and Christian conversions grew almost in parallel, especially on the southern island of Kyushu, which had been the Christian stronghold from the start. By the early 1580s there were, astonishingly, some 150,000 baptised Christians in Japan, the vast majority on Kyushu.

Astonishingly, and suspiciously. The numbers had far outstripped any priestly provision: there were in 1583 32 priests in Japan, all of them European. Many of these were plainly factional, political conversions, taking

their lead from local political leaders. That was of course the way things worked in Europe, and a more cynical missionary establishment might have gone with it. Not, however, Alessandro Valignano, the Jesuits' new Visitor of Missions to the Indies, who arrived in 1579 and was horrified rather than excited by what he found: not the flourishing, glorious mission field which his colleagues' letters had described, but a deeply politicised movement that was pursuing sheer numbers rather than deep or sustainable conversions. He swiftly imposed a series of changes: setting up a seminary in Japan, patronising translation of texts into Japanese and pressing for much greater embrace of Japanese culture by the missionaries. Japanese social norms, hierarchies and formalities, he insisted, must be followed. The Jesuits should build houses in the Japanese style, participate in tea ceremonies and adopt Japanese customs of hygiene, which, let's say, were rather more exacting than those of contemporary Europeans. He also, fatefully, secured a major logistical coup in 1580: a daimyo on Christianised Kyushu granted the Jesuits a lease over the small port of Nagasaki, including the right to regulate trade there and keep the accompanying customs revenues. This would become a key base of operations for the Japanese mission, a vital source of funds, and also the most significant centre of the Christian population. That small port would balloon into one of Japan's most substantial cities.

As that shows, although Valignano was concerned to nurture the spiritual side of the mission, he was not naïve about the political context. He met Nobunaga the same year and was clear that the strategic alliance with him offered enormous potential. Unfortunately, Nobunaga's military luck ran out in 1582 and he was forced into a ritual suicide. One of his generals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, took up his cause, and indeed finished the job, uniting most of Japan under his effective rule by the end of the 1580s. At first the alliance with the Jesuits seemed to be preserved, not least since Hideyoshi was as anti-Buddhist as his old master: the Jesuits received grants of land and he employed Christians as his generals, and when he established military control over Kyushu in 1587, the Christian daimyos were favoured. However, Hideyoshi was also growing concerned by the Christian counterweight to the Buddhists that had been created. The story goes that, after an evening drinking on Kyushu in 1587, he summoned the commander of his guards, a Christian named Takayama Ukon, and demanded as a test of loyalty that he renounce his Christianity on the spot. When he refused, he was sent into exile and Hideyoshi summoned the head of the Japanese Jesuits, Gaspar Coelho, accusing him of forced conversions, foreign allegiances and selling Japanese subjects as slaves to the Portuguese. That last accusation seems to have been entirely groundless but tells you something of the mood. The following day he issued an edict expelling all foreign missionaries from Japan, and barring daimyos from becoming Christians.

This produced an immediate crisis, naturally enough, but partly because there was not at present a ship on which the foreigners could leave, the order had to be suspended, and it slowly became clear that Hideyoshi was not going to enforce it: it remained hanging as a permanent threat, and slowly the Jesuits began operating again under its shadow, and when a ship came they did not in fact leave. In 1591 Valignano had a cordial meeting with Hideyoshi and the suspicion seemed to be lifting. But then in 1593 a new element entered the picture: a second Catholic mission, led this time not by Jesuits but Spanish Franciscan friars, the order who had pioneered the mission in the Americas and who had their own distinct ideas about how it was done, which did not involve so much cautious and respectful acculturation. The Franciscans opened a public church in Nagasaki in 1594 without permission, and soon acquired a reputation for being abrasive. Even this might not have caused trouble without the so-called San Felipe incident, when, on 19 October 1596, a badly off-course Spanish galleon called the San Felipe was washed up in Japan, and its officers, indignant at being arrested and brusquely handled, tried to bluster their way out of trouble by boasting about the vast size of the Spanish empire, brandishing a world map demonstrating it, and, apparently, insisting that missionaries were a vital part of such conquests. This did not have the desired effect. If Hideyoshi had suspected before that Christians were of questionable loyalty, they now looked positively dangerous. He had the ship seized and its crew deported, and he ordered all the Franciscans in Japan executed. Around 160 people were arrested, both Spanish Franciscans and their Japanese adherents, although the officer in charge ensured that most of them were spared. The final total of those executed on 5 February 1597 was 26: six European Franciscans, ten Japanese Franciscan brothers, three Japanese Jesuits, and seven ordinary Japanese Christians: they spent

a couple of months being marched from Kyoto to Nagasaki, paraded through the streets, having had their ears partly cut off as a humiliation: and then at last they were crucified, using the punishment they had taught their captors: although tied with ropes rather than nailed, and then speared rather than being left for days to die in the old Roman style.

The order for the Jesuits to leave the country was renewed, and no-one knew this time if it was for real. This all happened amid another political crisis, with the ageing Hideyoshi desperately and vainly trying to ensure that when he died his son would succeed him: a show of anti-Christian strength was probably more part of that struggle than a settled policy. Matters were still unclear when Hideyoshi died in September 1598, kicking off first a struggle for power and then an actual civil war which ended with a crushing victory, not for Hideyoshi's hapless son, but for Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was de facto ruler of Japan from 1600 and formally became shogun in 1603. He died in 1616, but he created the strongly unified government, the so-called Tokugawa Shogunate, that would govern Japan until 1868. The political situation was now diametrically opposed to the one the Jesuits had found in the 1540s: there was only one centre of political power with which to deal. Ieyasu at first permitted the Jesuits to remain, and the period from 1590-1614 was the heyday of Christian growth in Japan, despite the killings of 1597. Jesuit numbers peaked at 140 in 1607; by 1614 there were something like 300,000 – three hundred thousand! – Japanese Christians. These were no longer, it seems, politically organised mass conversions, but actual, grassroots growth, drawn from all levels of society. Nagasaki became in effect a Christian city. With few priests, lay confraternities, governed for and by ordinary Japanese believers, became central to the community's life, often with charitable works at their heart.

The community was likely inevitably on a collision course with Ieyasu's regime. Some local daimyos engaged in persecution: in one notorious case in Hizen province on Kyushu in 1613, in which a daimyo executed eight families of Christians, he was daunted when, as we are told, 20,000 Christians showed up in order silently and peacefully to witness the executions, assembled in ranks – perhaps more threatening than an actual rebellion. Equally, any Japanese suspicions about the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Jesuits were being stoked by two groups of newcomers, Dutch and English merchants, who were keen to assure their hosts that the Jesuits were scheming and malicious agents of the devil. But we do not actually know quite what triggered Ieyasu's edict of 1614. In it he declared that

“The Christian band have come to Japan, not only sending their merchant vessels to exchange commodities, but also longing to disseminate an evil law, to overthrow right doctrine, so that they may change the government of the country and obtain possession of the land. ... These must be instantly swept out, so that not an inch of soil remains to them in Japan.”

All Christian clergy were expelled, and the policing of the whole country's religious orthodoxy was put under the control of – as you have probably already guessed – the Buddhists, whom Ieyasu was turning into a state religion. This time, they meant it. Churches were destroyed. The power of the last pro-Christian daimyos was broken. Clergy were assembled in Nagasaki for deportation, and by the end of 1614 most had gone. However, at least 33 priests remained in Japan illegally, and for the time being lay Christians were left largely undisturbed. Indeed, during this period of phoney persecution Christian growth continued, with quite rapid spread into northern Honshu. The real shift came when Ieyasu died in 1616 and was succeeded by his son Tokugawa Hidetada, who turned an anti-Christian policy into a general opposition to foreign contacts and adventures of any kind. He also oversaw a slow increase of persecution: by the time he abdicated in 1623 at least 323 Christians had been executed. This included a particularly severe purge in 1622 provoked by the discovery of two European priests whom a Japanese Christian trader had been trying to smuggle into the country: 55 Christians were killed in Nagasaki on 10 September, 25 by burning, 30 by beheading. The

burning was done in part to prevent relics being gathered, and anyone seen to be praying at the executions was threatened with the same fate.

The policy was redoubled again by the next shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu, who, shocked or emboldened by the discovery of a clandestine Christian community complete with Jesuit priests in his capital city of Edo, began his reign with a show of force. 89 people were killed in two mass executions in December 1623: fourteen of these were not actually Christians themselves, but were accused of sheltering or assisting Christians. The movement was not yet broken: we still have formal Jesuit records from 1624-6, showing they were still winning converts. Only in 1627 did the persecution become general. He and his lieutenants now recognised that merely killing Christians could be counterproductive, by the classic logic of martyrdom, and so set their sights on making Christians publicly renounce their faith, by the use of brutal torture where necessary. Scalding was one favoured method. Another was being hanged upside down over a festering pit until you either recanted or died. To the regime's dismay, no priests or lay brothers recanted – or not until 1633, when Christavao Ferreira, the Portuguese vice-principal of the Jesuits in Japan, cracked after six hours hung over the pit, and not only recanted but turned informer. In total some 1200 Christians were killed either by execution or torture from 1627-34.

The final end to the drama came in December 1637, on western Kyushu, which had been a Christian stronghold for so long and to which many Christians from elsewhere in Japan had retreated, including former samurai. The confraternities were still functioning there, but the new daimyo was determined at last to implement his shogun's policy. The result was a rebellion. This of course confirmed all the regime's fears about Christian subversion, although in fact the rebels did not receive any outside assistance. Nor were they led by priests: those were by now all gone or dead. But it was plainly and unmistakably a Christian, indeed a messianic rebellion, the grim proof that this was more than a political game of shadows. Inspired by prophecies of revival from dark times, stirred up by an unusual autumnal flowering of the cherry trees, they won initial victories against their daimyo's forces and came close to taking the castle of Shimabara. If they had marched on nearby Nagasaki, they would likely have taken that too. When the shogun's own forces landed on Kyushu, they fought with ferocious, apocalyptic fervor, and with some success: indeed, after a bloody failed attempt to break them in February 1638, a new commander decided simply to pen them in and starve them out. The rebels were broken in April and slaughtered with no quarter given.

The lesson of the rebellion was never forgotten by the Tokugawa regime, which to an extraordinary extent organised itself for the next two centuries and more around fear and hatred of Christianity. From 1639 all contact with the outside world was strictly forbidden. In 1640 a Portuguese embassy arrived in Japan, attempting to pay debts to Japanese merchants: they had no missionaries, but nevertheless their ship was destroyed along with its cargo, and almost all of them were executed, with only a handful sent back to make sure the message was received. A new authority, the Christian Inquisition Office, was created, charged with hunting down all hidden Christians. Central to this became the so-called *fumi-e*, a technique used to compel Christians to reveal themselves: remarkably, for decades, every year on Kyushu and a little less regularly elsewhere in Japan, every adult was required publicly to tread on an image of a crucifix or of the Virgin Mary. This extraordinary requirement was enforced right across the country for most of the seventeenth century, and it was only formally relaxed in 1792. In 1687, new regulations were put in place to ensure that anyone related to or descended from a known Christian was put under additional, lifelong surveillance. Nor was this mere paranoia. Arrests and executions continued throughout this period, tailing off by the century's end. The last mass execution of Christians which we know of took place in 1697.

All this took place in a Japan that was now completely inaccessible to the Catholic world – a few further attempts by missionaries to land ended badly – but this did not mean they were forgotten. Instead, the sheer scale of the mission's drama – to go from nothing to a thriving church hundreds of thousands strong to

genocidal persecution to, apparently, nothing again in a single century – gripped the imagination of Catholic Christians all over the world, nowhere more than back home in Europe. The Jesuits were always excellent at keeping records, sharing news and feeding the publicity machine on which their work depended, and readers devoured their tales of this impressively civilized country in the East Indies where the Christian gospel seemed to have fallen on such fertile soil, where Christianity was growing faster and apparently more robustly than anywhere else in the world. When the tide turned, and the killings began – not least because they began so strikingly, in 1597, with a series of crucifixions – Catholic Christendom was ready with its reactions. Shock, horror and dismay, for sure, but also a certain grim triumph: martyrdom had been a part of Christianity’s story about itself since ancient times, and this fitted all too cleanly into the narrative. The initial account of the 1597 executions, by the Portuguese Jesuit Luis Frois, was published in Italian and Latin in 1599, and ran through at least five editions that year, with French versions to follow: this was a fairly straight account, with no time for lavish illustration or interpretation. That would follow. Over the course of the seventeenth century the martyrs of Japan would be celebrated again and again by European Catholics. This French woodcut from 1628 is perhaps the most famous: the portrait of what were by then known to be only the first of the martyrs. And so we move from the persecuting crowds at their feet, all of them faceless; to the ranks of the martyrs, in unison but each face depicted with striking individuality; to, above them, the company of heaven preparing their martyrs’ palms of victory. This German engraving of the same date doesn’t have quite the same dignity to it but makes up for it with vividness. The reason we have these from 1628 is that, in September of the previous year, Pope Urban VIII had beatified the twenty-six Nagasaki victims, formally recognising and celebrating them as martyrs for the faith, and they remain known by Catholics down to the present as the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan.

But with this, as with any atrocity story, we always need to ask: *cui bono*? Who benefits from the telling of this story? Whose cause does it serve? In Europe, this was the age of the Counter-Reformation and of the Thirty Years’ War, so examples of Catholic militancy and faithfulness were very welcome to shore up support; these were heroes to be emulated. And there was a lower, more political story, too, about the perennial rivalry between different religious orders: although the Japanese mission had mostly been the work of the Jesuits, the twenty-six martyrs of Nagasaki had mostly been Franciscans, and since Urban VIII had earlier made some of the first founders of the Jesuits saints, this helped to even the score. But there’s another, more specific story that’s maybe of more local interest. By the late 1610s the Japanese mission was effectively over, but there was another prickly, assertive island kingdom which had recently switched from being welcoming to Catholicism to persecuting it with brutal vigour. English Catholics did not suffer quite so genocidal a purge as their Japanese brethren, but the story of what had happened on the other side of the world – and especially of how heroically Japan’s believers had held firm to the end – was very relevant to them. This book is an English translation of the first-hand account of that persecution written by the Spanish Jesuit Pedro Morejon, published in 1619, and it came with a freshly written preface, addressed ‘To All That Suffer Persecution in England For Catholic Religion’. In this the translator emphasised just how similar the English and Japanese situations were:

“They be falsely slandered and calumniated in many things by the Devil’s ministers, and so be you: they be persecuted for their Religion, many of them to death and more to loss of goods, by the enemies of Christ and his holy Church; and so be you. ... Finally they for their valour and constancy in God’s cause be famous in all those parts of the world, yea, and in Europe also; and you for yours be no less glorious, both in all Europe, and in the rest of the Christian world.”

And the point of this was not simply to flatter English Catholics, but to exhort them:

“Be more careful to commend in your prayers to Almighty God the necessities of those poor afflicted Christians, your Brethren, as also more willing to imitate their admirable examples of valour and courage in the cause of Christ.”

Although, he then added, some of the examples of Japanese suffering were so extreme that readers should admire them but, as he did not quite put it, shouldn't try this at home.

This book even claimed, rather tenuously, that the Protestant Christians who were persecuting English Catholics were also involved in the Japanese persecutions, an apparent nod to the role of English and Dutch merchants in feeding Japanese suspicion of the Jesuits. It was a valiant attempt to unite the eastern and western persecutions into one vast struggle, and not completely groundless, but in fact what made the example of the Japanese persecutions so powerful in a divided Europe was that even Protestants were forced to concede their admiration for the steadfastness of Japan's Catholics. Reyer Gysbertsz, a Dutch Protestant merchant who was stationed in Nagasaki in the mid-1620s, unproblematically called the Japanese Catholic victims 'martyrs', and added:

"Their resolution is all the more to be admired, since they knew so little of God's word, so that one might term it stubbornness rather than steadfastness. ... It is indeed extraordinary that amongst them are so many who remain steadfast to the end, and endure so many insufferable torments, in despite of their scanty knowledge of the Holy Scriptures."

This was not what Protestants expected of Catholics: he seems to have found it genuinely baffling. What greater proof is there of how valuable a story this was?

Still, as the Japanese persecution faded into memory and Japan itself remained resolutely closed, these atrocities slowly lost their prominence for the Catholic world. The stories were retold, and the accounts reprinted, but eventually in a trickle rather than a flood. What changed that was the sudden reopening of Japan in the mid-19th century, as rising European and American imperialism made isolation unsustainable: famously, on 8 July 1853, the American naval commodore Matthew Perry, under orders to open Japan to American trade, sailed into Edo Bay, Tokyo Bay as we now call it, with eight ships armed with 73 cannon firing explosive shells, and, as they say, made the Japanese an offer they couldn't refuse. The result was a twenty-year process in which Japan switched from aggressive isolationism to determination to meet the western imperial powers on their own terms and beat them. This did, however, indeed involve opening to trade, and also to Christian mission. Western memories of Japan's long-ago Christian century were dusted off and hopes that the Christianisation of Japan might resume ran high. The Christian missionary surge into Japan is beyond my scope today: it is enough to say that there was enormous effort for very little return. When the United States occupied Japan after 1945, General Douglas MacArthur made Christianising the defeated enemy his personal mission: to no avail. All I want to notice is how the memory of the seventeenth-century atrocities has figured since Japan was reopened.

For if the nineteenth-century missionaries did not succeed in converting Japan to Christianity, they did make an astonishing discovery. Despite two and a half centuries of ferocious, systematic persecution, Japanese Christianity had not in fact been entirely exterminated. Once Christianity was legalised in 1873, several scattered communities of so-called *Kakure Kirishitan*, hidden Christians, slowly revealed themselves. They were and are found chiefly on Kyushu and its offshore islands, in particular on the small islands of Ikitsuki and Hirado off the northwest corner of Kyushu. These communities had endured alone for nearly two and a half centuries; they had no priests, but they baptised their children, taught them Japanese-language prayers and sometimes versions of Latin or Portuguese texts, and met secretly in private homes for worship. Some of them concealed their worship under Buddhist forms, for example using traditional Japanese Buddhist images of a mother and child, like this, and venerating them as images of the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ. In particular, they preserved a strong sense of the liturgical year, arranged around a series of festivals.

And, of course, they burnished and treasured the memory of their martyrs. This was a dreadfully dangerous thing to do, and one result is that the rites of commemoration were once again often dressed up in Buddhist or Shinto clothes. Sites associated with the deaths of local Christian martyrs were often marked, in Shinto fashion, by the planting of a central pine tree surrounded by a ring of smaller trees; there are tales of relics being buried at the roots of the central tree – these groves, however, tended not to survive the depredations of the twentieth century. The modern *Kakure Kirishitan* have added stone shrines to these spots and burn incense and make offerings of food and *sake* there. Some of these graves are those of individuals who are otherwise unrecorded, but some of them we can document: for example, the Ikitsuki martyr Gasuparu Nishi, a high-born administrator sent into exile here after his Christian master was driven from office in 1609, and beheaded later the same year, together with his wife and son. The stone graves are still tended; when the memorial tree was felled, wood from it was used to make a crucifix now on display in Nagasaki. Other sites are more general, such as the so-called mound of a thousand people or Senninzuka, said to be the site of a mass grave, or the memorial to a smaller group of Christians who included a pregnant woman, who had begged, vainly, to be spared on account of her unborn child. More important still is the tiny island of Nakae no Shima, which between 1622 and 1624 was the site of fourteen executions of Christians, who were taken there and then strangled or beheaded, and their bodies thrown into the sea to thwart relic-collectors. Instead the island itself became a relic. The *Kakure Kirishitan*'s longstanding practice is to bring water from the island to use for baptisms, water taken in particular from a small, intermittent spring of fresh water in one spot on the island: the spring, and sometimes the entire island, is known as 'San Juan-sama', that is, St John the Baptist. The spring's intermittency is part of its power: a *Kakure Kirishitan* account from the early 20th century claimed that waters flow from the spring when the prayers said in front of it are heard in Rome.

The mood of these commemorations, it appears, is not and has not been confrontational or vindictive: this was a defeated, almost exterminated community for whom anger, even righteous anger, was an unaffordable luxury. The prominence of the martyrs and their cults in part reflects simply the huge impact on this community of the cataclysmic events of the early 17th century, and the relative ease with which Christian shrines could be disguised as Buddhist or Shinto ones, even, in some cases, attracting non-Christian devotees too. But there is also a sense of atonement. The *Kakure Kirishitan* bought their survival at a price: in such a formerly heavily Christianised area, faith could be concealed and prayers whispered, but there was no escaping the *fumi-e* rite, the need to prove allegiance to the emperor by trampling Christian images. For communities which had only survived by making such a terrible compromise to honour the memory of the martyrs who had chosen to die rather than to yield is hardly triumphalist, but rather penitential. And worse, since for Catholic Christians without priests, the sacramental healing offered by confession, atonement and reconciliation was not available to them. It's been plausibly argued that the *Kakure Kirishitan* honoured their martyrs so assiduously as this was the best and only way they could repent for their own and their ancestors' sins. It is a painful reading of the story. But I could only wish that religious communities which suffer and remember atrocities might learn from the example of the *Kakure Kirishitan*. To recall atrocities with sorrow and repentance, rather than with supposedly righteous rage, might perhaps be a beginning of wisdom.

Some of the *Kakure Kirishitan*, especially on the islands, retained their distinctive identity and traditions after the opening. The majority, however, were welcomed back into the Catholic fold. We are not talking about a lot of people: perhaps 30,000 of them. Nevertheless, Nagasaki once again became the capital of Christian Japan, and the Catholic Church revived its own memory of the martyrs. The original 26 Martyrs of 1597, who had been beatified in 1627, were canonised as saints by Pope Pius IX in 1862. And they were only the beginning: in 1867, a further group of 205 Japanese martyrs of the seventeenth century were beatified by Rome. In our own lifetimes, this group has grown still further: Pope John Paul II canonised sixteen further Japanese martyr-saints in 1987, and his successor Benedict XVI beatified a group of 188 Japanese martyrs in 2008. These martyrs have become hugely important to the Japanese Catholic Church's sense of its own identity. That church nowadays stands at some half a million people – that is, around half of one percent of Japan's population: many of them are Filipino immigrants, or the descendants of Japanese migrants to South America who have returned to their ancestral country. The focus of memory remains above all on the original twenty-six martyrs, to whom this vast public monument, with accompanying museum, was constructed in 1962. Modern Japan may not have

embraced Christianity, but it has embraced this part of its own past. The Basilica of the Twenty-Six Martyrs in Nagasaki – built in 1864, before Catholicism was officially legalised – was in 2018 recognised, along with eleven other sites in the region, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the whole group being known as the Hidden Christian Sites. The proposal to UNESCO came, not from the Catholic community, but from the Japanese government. The wider Japanese awareness of the persecution owes a great deal to one extraordinary book, the 1966 novel *Silence* by the Japanese Catholic Shūsaku Endō, which centres on the moral struggle of a captured seventeenth-century missionary who knows that unless he renounces his faith by trampling a *fumi-e* image, his fellow-Christians will be killed. The book was a prizewinning critical success in Japan and was particularly embraced by the Japanese pacifist left – more so, indeed, than by Endō’s fellow-Catholics. It has been adapted into a stage play, an opera, and no less than three films, most recently Martin Scorsese’s harrowing 2016 version also called *Silence*.

The mood of Endō’s novel, and in much modern recollection of the Japanese martyrs, is neither angry nor celebratory, nor even penitential in the manner of the *Kukure Krishitan* shrines, but somber: a recollection of suffering from which there was no deliverance and which is not sweetened by any palpable redemption. There are many reasons why this might be so but let me finish by talking about one of them. On 6 August 1945, the United States Air Force dropped an atomic bomb over the city of Hiroshima. Despite President Truman’s ultimatum Japan did not surrender, and on 9 August a second American mission set off to drop a second bomb over the city of Kokura. Heavy cloud cover forced the pilots to revert to their secondary target, Nagasaki, chosen chiefly on account of its heavy shipbuilding industry. However, cloud cover was heavy there too, and with fuel running critically low the bomber *Bockscar* dropped its bomb nearly two miles away from the planned target site. The resulting 22 kiloton explosion was not, therefore, quite as destructive as the Hiroshima bomb, despite being nearly twice as powerful. The brunt was born by the Urakami valley, and the hills surrounding the valley gave some protection to the rest of the city. The total death toll remains uncertain: but at least 40,000 people died in and shortly after the bombing, and more likely 70,000 or even 80,000. And the reason this is a part of my story today is that Urakami was the centre of Nagasaki’s Catholic population. Of some 12,000 Catholics in the city, perhaps 8500 died in the bombing: that is, over two-thirds of the entire community, and over a tenth of all of the casualties. With one bomb, the US Air Force had killed more Japanese Catholics than had been executed in two and a half centuries of persecution.

How were the surviving Japanese Catholics to make sense of this fresh calamity, one shared with the nation but also peculiarly theirs? The most prominent response came from the Catholic convert and Doctor Takashi Nagai, whose wife died in the bombing and who was himself injured, eventually dying of radiation-related illness in 1951. For him, Nagasaki, and in particular Urakami, was again become a field of martyrs: this was an extension of that past and gave it meaning. In 1948 he wrote:

“So many martyrdoms, uninterrupted persecution and the atomic bomb ... These are the trials that tell of the glory of God. ... Was not Urakami – the most sacred place in all Japan – chosen as a victim, a pure lamb that had to be slaughtered and burned on the altar of sacrifice to expiate this sin of humanity, the World War?”

The book became a bestseller throughout Japan, far beyond the Catholic community. This view of Nagasaki as a burned offering, mutely sacrificing itself for peace, is one which some Japanese Catholics have begun to push back against, but the notion remains powerful, not least in Nagasaki itself. The Catholic community there had long organised its memory of the centuries of suppression into four persecutions, culminating in the Fourth Persecution of the late 1860s, just before the legalisation of Christianity. The atomic bombing came to be known as the Fifth Persecution, and this time the martyrs that were memorialised were not a few select individuals from the thousands, but a symbol: Urakami’s cathedral, all-but destroyed in the blast. Even immediately afterwards, it was the site for memorial worship. It has been rebuilt now, but blast-damaged statues still survive and are preserved in its grounds: and this stained-glass window in the rebuilt cathedral commemorates the martyrdom of

its predecessor. And when Notre Dame cathedral in Paris was partly destroyed by fire last year, the Catholics of Nagasaki offered themselves as sign of comfort and hope to their distraught French co-religionists. We don't need to describe either catastrophe as a burned offering to accept that, in some way, a circle has been closed, or that, in our own century as in the seventeenth, shared suffering can also mean shared consolation.

Further reading

Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: the Jesuits in Japan and China 1542-1742* (1994)

Charles R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650* (1951)

Michael Cooper, 'A Mission Interrupted: Japan' in R. Po-chia Hsia (ed), *A Companion to the Reformation World* (2004)

Stephen Turnbull, 'The veneration of the martyrs of Ikitsuki (1609-1645) by the Japanese "hidden Christians"' in Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (1993)

Gwyn McClelland, *Dangerous Memory in Nagasaki: Prayers, Protests and Catholic Survivor Narratives* (2020)

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