

# Where Is This “Western” Japan of Ours Going?

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## Memorial Stones with Western Dates

NOT TOO LONG AGO (November 15th) the Ryōzengokoku Jinja, a shrine at which I have from time to time paid my respects, celebrated the feast day of the great patriot Sakamoto Ryōma. Taking the occasion to visit the grave of the departed patriot, I made for the entrance to the cemetery where I was struck by the large number of memorial stone tablets. I was touched by how many of them were offered by young people, but as I looked more closely at the tablets I began to have mixed feelings. The dates scrawled in the memorial inscriptions for the most part followed the Western calendar. I suppose this is to be expected of the younger generation, but one wonders if it does not grieve the spirits of those who were willing to lay down their lives for their country to see such vital dates written this way. Those who want to offer a memorial to the patriotic ancestors should, one would think, understand the difference between Japanese and Western methods of dating. This may be but one more sign of the sad state into which Japan has fallen today.

Is this same scene not repeated in local shrines across the country in the offering of votive petitions and the like? Surely individual shrines should be instructing people on the use of Japanese dating for such occasions, or at least display a guide for calculating dates in the traditional manner.

## End of the Year or Christmas?

Anyone with any sense at all must be aware that in recent years the distinctive atmosphere that marks the closing of the year—the end-of-the-year rush, the ringing out of the old year and ringing in of the new, in a word, the Shinto sense of “year”—has begun to disappear from our midst.

Any number of reasons for this turn of events come to mind, but one of them is surely that of late the twelfth month has come to be thought of as

“the Christmas month.” One sees this more than ever among the young in particular.

Christmas is not of course originally a feast of the Christians. It goes back to the hibernal festivals of the Romans, Germans, and Celts, and as such is a kind of Western version of a “Shinto matsuri.” In this sense, it comes as no surprise that we ourselves should intuitively feel some affinity with it.

The problem is how something as alien to all of this as Christianity should have hitched on to something so “European.” Recently Christians themselves have begun to put more and more stress on these European elements in order to appeal to the inclination of the Japanese towards the West. This method of proselytizing in fact also played a role in the Christianization of Europe. Missionaries from the regions around the Mediterranean attracted the “barbarian” Germanic people of the North to Christianity with a display of the products of their “high civilization.”

Be that as it may, there are more homes in Japan today decorated with Christmas trees than with the traditional pine-and-bamboo, and among the young Christmas stories are better known than our own myths. The idea of a “savior” who alone brings the human race salvation from its “sins” has been implanted in them.

This is more than a matter of a nursery tale that can be brushed aside with a smile. The essence of proselytizing does not lie in the communication of complicated doctrines. Most people enter the faith for extremely superficial reasons. In the West as well, conversion to Christianity—whether by coercion or free choice—begins with the superficial.

Of late Valentine’s Day and Halloween have jumped on the bandwagon of Christmas’s success. Even if the connection of these feasts to Christianity is more tenuous than Christmas is, they are not entirely unrelated. Just as Christmas is destroying the atmosphere of the end of the year, Valentine’s Day has cast a shadow over Setsubun, the celebration of the first day of Spring according to the traditional calendar. Following the same pattern, Japan’s annual national feasts are slowly being eroded. Or is this to be welcomed as merely the latest display of our “multilayered” culture?

### Weddings for “One-Day Christians”

There is something strange about the increase of Church weddings over the past several years, a matter that has been under some discussion of late in the pages of the *Jinja shinpō*. Tourist agencies and mass media have fanned the flames by advertising how “romantic” getting married in a Church is, and the Churches themselves gladly chime in to back them up.

If anything, Christianity is critical of the “lack of principle” and “irreligiosity” of the Japanese, and yet the fact remains it is the Churches that are getting the most out of this “lack of principle.” Not only the actual “nonbelievers” who are being married, but their families and all involved are invited to take part in religious worship under the name of a “wedding ceremony,” to listen to a sermon, and to pray. One could hardly imagine a more propitious opportunity for evangelizing a captive audience of “nonbelievers.”

We Japanese are, granted, a religiously tolerant people, but there is something odd here that appears nowhere else. Whatever else is to be said about the whole business, one side, the Church, completely repudiates the other side’s belief as “heresy.” Can the Church be serious in blessing the weddings of “nonbelievers”? After all, are not nonbelievers really “headed for damnation”? What meaning can it possibly have to be a “one-day Christian” just for a wedding?

Never has Christianity taken a positive, affirmative position towards marriage, let alone sex. Sex has been rejected outright as something evil and sinful. It is said that this is because Mary was a virgin, and for this reason the purest and most genuine Christians have rejected sex and marriage, and at times Platonic love has been idealized. Those who “wallow” in sex have been relegated to the fires of hell.

Monasteries and convents, which are cut off from all sex, represent the ideal of life as it was meant to be, and even lay brothers who were not monks were bound to celibacy. Moreover, at least in the middle ages, the Church’s basic attitude towards marriage for the laity in general was, in the words of Paul, that “it is well for them to remain single, as I do.”

The Church’s promotion of “monogamy” and “prohibition of divorce” do not stem from a positive, affirmative blessing of sex and marriage but rather from a negative position that seeks to keep sexual activity to a minimum. Jesus preached that those who give up parents and wife and children “for my sake” will earn “everlasting life.” In the Japanese translation of the New Testament, the word *wife* was left out for some reason.\* (In fact, in medieval reform movements monks with wives were forced to give them up, which means that in effect the Church promoted divorce.)

Reflecting on the Church’s position, one can only feel pity for the young people who have their hearts set on a Church wedding. More than pity, the problem is that the Church’s attitude towards marriage, or if not that at least

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\* None of the standard Japanese translations omit this term from the passage in which it appears (Luke 18:29). It is possible that the author confused this with a similar passage in Mark 10:29 or in Matthew 19:29, where the term wife does not appear in the original nor, of course, in the Japanese translation.

a preference for Christian ceremonies, has seeped deeply into the hearts of many of those who participate in the event.

### **Peel Away a Layer and ...**

The Western calendar, Christmas, Church weddings—when all is said and done these things are no more than Christianity’s way of hitching itself to the “romantic” culture that goes by the name of “Europe.” And what it teaches is that the human being is a “sinner,” that sex are evil and sinful, and that history is eschatological (which is related to the Western idea of the calendar).

Since the Meiji period, the Westernization of our country is said to have involved only the importation of “things,” but how much longer will this be the case? Peel away a layer from today’s ever-progressing Westernization and what do you find if not Christianization? Keep up like this, and soon we will no longer be able to say that ‘Just for December, Japan is a Christian country.’”

—from *Jinja shimpō*, January 1, 1993  
[translated by J. W. Heisig]