



Ikuo Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*

Brill: Leiden, Boston & Köln, 2001. Brill's Japan Studies Library
vol. 16. xxxi + 201 pp. \$63.00 cloth, ISBN 90-04-12290-7.

JAPAN'S EARLY CHRISTIANS remain an intriguing subject of scholarly inquiry both inside and outside of Japan. The formidable obstacles confronting the various Christian missions are well known: the hostility towards their efforts of the major Buddhist establishments; the tenuous political situation of the late Sengoku and Momoyama years; the critical shortage of human and other resources to support the evangelism effort; the unseemly internecine strife among the various missions; and of course the linguistic and cultural hurdles that European clergy had to overcome. That the missions enjoyed any success is remarkable, attesting to the resourcefulness of evangelizer and evangelized alike. As many as 1 to 2 percent of Japan's population eventually embraced Christianity to one degree or another, and once the persecutions began in earnest, many of these Christians took the practice of their faith underground. These "hidden Christians" have been widely admired for their defiance of the Tokugawa state and their determination to preserve the creed of their ancestors.

Christianity in Early Modern Japan is based on the author's 1996 doctoral disser-

tation at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union. It aims to explore "the popular religious life and culture of ordinary Japanese followers" of Christianity, and to inquire into what "the faith of these nominally Christian converts [was] like" (xiv). The author, Ikuo Higashibaba, attempts to demonstrate that "what developed on the popular level was in fact a Japanese Christianity that incorporated traits of the popular religious culture of Japan and came to constitute a segment of Japanese religion" (xv).

These few quotations disclose a great deal. First, given the scarcity of sources attesting to the Christian experiences of "ordinary" Japanese, it is of course difficult to generalize about their faith. Higashibaba acknowledges as much when he characterizes the relevant sources as "limited both qualitatively and quantitatively" and as "not always trustworthy" (72); he accurately describes Fabian Fucan's (1565–1621) *Myōtei mondō* as "the only document available today which directly conveys a Japanese follower's understanding of the Kirishitan teaching during the Christian century" (74); and he admits that evidence "demonstrating lay followers' intellectual understandings of Deus remains sketchy..., [preventing] us from attempting to recreate a general pattern of their understanding of Deus" (94). All this, of course, begs the question of why Higashibaba chose to undertake his project in this manner, and his solution to the problem—"to examine Kirishitan teachings in the context of the Japanese religious culture of the time" (76) by comparing them with the Ikkō movement within True Pure Land Buddhism—sheds little new light.

Higashibaba's use of the phrase "nominally Christian converts" is likewise telling. That some will embrace a creed for non-spiritual reasons, or that the individual experience of faith will be uneven within any spiritual community or even within the same individual from one moment to the next should go without saying and is as true today as it was four centuries ago. As if to underscore his sense of the distinctive character of early Japanese Christians, Higashibaba refers to them throughout most of his book as Kirishitan, and his attitude toward them seemed to me at times to be condescending. For example, despite his insistence that he will discuss their underground experience not as apostates but as "Kirishitan who maintained their faith under the persecution" (xxiii), Higashibaba writes of how underground Christians "continued to perform a water rite to initiate babies into Kirishitan families" (107). "Water rite" indeed: Baptism was *the* sacrament that could under exceptional circumstances (such as those in Japan during the period of persecution) be performed by a lay person; furthermore, the evidence suggests that the particulars of baptism were transmitted with remarkable fidelity—and at considerable personal risk—during the underground centuries. Similarly, when Higashibaba asks whether those who outwardly apostatized but clandestinely retained the faith of their spiritual forebears were still Kirishitan, his answer is that, "The hidden Kirishitan themselves certainly believed that they were still Kirishitan" (155). As it happens, so did the Tokugawa state.

Further, the author's effort to demonstrate that "what developed on the popular level was in fact a Japanese Christianity that incorporated traits of the popular reli-

gious culture of Japan and came to constitute a segment of Japanese religion” is utterly uncontroversial. What, one wonders, would Christianity in Japan at the popular level be other than a form of Japanese Christianity that variously reflected aspects of the existing religious culture? Who, indeed, would quarrel with the proposition that Japanese Christianity constituted a component of Japanese religion?

Christianity in Early Modern Japan does have its strengths. The discussion of the 1591 *Dochiriina Kirishitan* in Chapter Three is excellent, and most scholars of the subject agree that no catechetical text had greater influence on Japanese Christianity during both its above ground and underground phases. Higashibaba identifies the “five essential church laws...for every Christian” specified in the *Dochiriina* (70): observing Sundays and other holy days, making confession at least annually, receiving the Eucharist on Easter, fasting and observing meatless Fridays and Saturdays, and tithing. With the exception of the Eucharist, which was impossible in the absence of ordained clergy, these are precisely the religious practices that most animated Christianity in Japan during its underground phase, a fact that Higashibaba unfortunately neglects to mention. In one of two appendices Higashibaba also provides a helpful translation of the *Dochiriina*’s Chapter Eleven, which deals with the seven sacraments. I was struck by the reference in this chapter to the metaphorical significance of mirrors as a means of explaining the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist (169–70):

No matter how many pieces you may break an *hostia* into, it does not mean that you break the flesh of the Lord. [His flesh] exists in its entirety in each piece of the broken *hostia*. For example, even though you may break a mirror reflecting a shape into tiny pieces, you do not break the shape itself. Each of the broken pieces still reflects a complete shape.... Although broken pieces of a mirror are small, what appears in them can be anything—even a large mountain, let alone things of human height...; [thus] how can we say that the Lord *Jesus Christo* who is *Infinito* is unable to be in the small *hostia* as he wants?

As those who have studied the subject know, mirrors were a significant component of the material culture of the underground Christians, a fact that Higashibaba again neglects to mention. These mirrors have often been interpreted in terms of Japanese folk religion, and here Higashibaba could have offered an altogether new perspective on their significance.

So, how is one to account for these omissions? Throughout the volume, Higashibaba favors interpretations that place Christian practices in the context of Japanese popular and folk religion, and not in the context of European-based Christianity, as Stephen Turnbull did in his *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan: A Study of their Development, Beliefs and Rituals to the Present Day* (1998). Higashibaba briefly addresses Turnbull’s study on pages 42 to 43, and students of the subject will surely want to compare their two approaches. Oddly, Higashibaba never mentions Christal Whelan’s *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan’s Hidden Christians* (1996), perhaps because Whelan’s study demonstrates the extraordinary

regional variation that existed among underground Christian communities—again something Higashibaba does not touch upon—and with the exception of an encyclopedia of Catholicism published in 1995, Turnbull's is the only item in the bibliography published after 1994.

Higashibaba's book is also full of typographical errors, and I shall only mention those that caused me to wonder whether anyone had ever actually checked the page proofs during the publication process. These include the hyphenization of the words "sta-ge" (99), "ta-ke" (146) and "enemi-es" (129) as written here; the fact that what should be "lightning" twice appears as "lightening" on pages xxv and xviii; and that the word "PRACTICE," which is part the title of Chapter Six, appears as "RACTICE" in the top line of all odd-numbered pages (the recto running head) from 127 to 159.

Ikuo Higashibaba is to be admired for wishing to correct certain long-standing misconceptions regarding Japan's early modern Christians, misconceptions that often can be traced to an over-reliance on the scholarship to be found in European archives. His effort to see this history from a Japanese perspective thus represents an important step in the right direction, but there remains much in need of correction.

Peter Nosco
University of British Columbia