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Report on the Symposium "Experiences With and Within: Christians in Japan from the 16th Century to the Present Day"
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Report on the Symposium “Experiences With and Within: Christians in Japan from the 16th Century to the Present Day”

On September 23-24 2005, the University of British Columbia’s Asian Centre in Vancouver Canada was the site for a remarkable symposium “Experiences With and Within: Christians in Japan from the 16th Century to the Present Day.” The symposium was co-organized by Peter Nosco of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, and the staff of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science’s San Francisco Office, with support from UBC’s Institute for Asian Research’s Program in Religion and Public Policy as well as other units at UBC.

The symposium emerged from the wish to honour UBC Professor Emeritus John Howes on the occasion of the publication of his Japan’s Modern Prophet: Uchimura Kanzô (1861-1930) by UBC Press. The initial plan was to gather a small group of scholars, including some of Prof. Howes former students and some of his other admirers to present papers not on Christianity in Japan but rather on Christians in Japan, focusing on the experiences of Christians both individually and collectively over the last four centuries and more.

With the fortuitous early involvement of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, we were able to expand the initial roster with several Japanese scholars, and in the end the symposium contained eight papers:

- Jurgis Elisonas, “The Act of Apostasy”
- Peter Nosco, “The Experiences of Individual Christians during Christianity’s Underground Years”
- George M. Oshiro “Nitobe Inazô and the Sapporo Band: Reflections on the Dawning of Protestant Christianity in Meiji Japan”
- Yosuke Nirei, “From the ‘Spirit of Independence’ to National Theology: Rendering Protestant Thought at the Turn of the Twentieth Century”
- Mark Mullins, “Kagawa Toyohiko: His Place in 20th Century Japanese Society and Culture”
John Howes, “Uchimura Kanzô”
Ryo Yoshida, “Japanese Immigrants and their Christian Communities in North America”

To no one’s surprise in view of the scholars who assembled, the symposium went exceptionally well, and during the roundtable discussions that concluded our gathering, two themes emerged. First, the cumulative effect of the new scholarship represented seemed to make it appropriate to explore whether the papers might be published together. And second, the absence of any papers specifically exploring the experiences of Christian women was a problem that had to be addressed. Mark Mullins and Peter Nosco agreed to look into both issues.

We were most fortunate on both fronts. Tomoko Kitagawa, Helen Ballhatchet and Emily Anderson stepped forward and accepted our invitation to contribute papers titled (respectively):

- The Conversion of Hideyoshi’s Daughter Gô
- Christianity and Gender Relationships in Japan: Case Studies of Marriage and Divorce in Early Meiji Protestant Circles


Again, the focus of our efforts from start to finish in this project was not on the well-explored territory of Christianity in Japan – the story of the missions, their successes, their demise, their return, and subsequent mixed success – but rather on the experiences of certain Christians in Japan, and in two papers the experiences of Japanese Christians outside Japan, both individually and collectively. Both the papers presented at the symposium and the collection of articles subsequently published in JJRS examine diverse Japanese experiences of Christianity clustered broadly around two traditions and time periods: the early Japanese encounter with Roman Catholicism beginning in the sixteenth century and the Japanese engagement with various forms of Protestant Christianity from the nineteenth century.
To be sure, there was no single experience that might be construed as 
representative of what it has meant to be a Christian in Japan, even within 
specific eras and the same order or denomination, and there will always be 
too many stories to tell. Nonetheless, our attempt to see something of the 
range of experience of being a Christian in Japan in different eras proved 
fruitful for those of us who were fortunate to be present at the 2005 sympos-
mium, and we are thankful to the editors of *JJRS* for affording us the opportu-
nity to share these fruits with a broader audience.

Summaries of each of the papers can be found at the *JJRS* web site, but 
cumulatively some broad themes emerged. One is the exotic appeal of Chris-
tianity. One sees this in a number of places:

- in its embrace by upper-class Japanese some four centuries and more 
  ago;
- in the overseas fascination with Japanese Christians paraded through 
  Europe in the 1580s;
- among avant-garde intellectuals and social activists in the Meiji and 
  Taisho eras; and,
- among Japanese abroad in North America where their faith was no 
  longer a minority creed.

In all these instances, we encounter an acceptance of Christianity as 
something socially fashionable as well as spiritually compelling.

Another theme is the broad foundation of support for the mission at the 
lay grassroots level, along with its lay spiritual leadership. Christian leaders 
– both lay and clergy, both then and more recently – may have overstated 
the weakness of the mission in order to strengthen their appeal for overseas 
support, and it may well be that our overall impressions of the mission may 
have been coloured by these records. If as the new evidence suggests the 
Christian mission was essentially self-supporting at the grass-roots level, with 
the bulk of its support coming from local individual Christians, this helps to 
explain a number of subsequent developments:

- the state’s ambivalent attitude toward the creed and its followers 
during the period 1585-1610, when Japan’s unifiers had more imme-
diately pressing issues confronting them;
- the state’s eventual resort to brutal repression for the following half-
century, when it resolved to address religious defiance directly and 
  decisively;
- the astonishing success of clandestine practitioners in taking their 
  creed underground and at least in some communities preserving its 
  essential doctrines with remarkable fidelity; and,
the resilience of the mission in modern times, when it seems in repeated renewal.

In paper after paper at the symposium and then again in the special issue, Christianity is seen generally to be much more than a set of doctrines for individual practitioners. Japanese Christians over more than four centuries were attracted by a host of facets, one of which was doctrinal to be sure, but others included the diverse appeal to modernity and cosmopolitanism, pacifism in some cases, social egalitarianism including the relatively high regard for women as brides and mothers, individualism rooted in individual dignity, and so on. For these Christians, their creed was as much an alternative way of life as it was an alternative set of beliefs or symbols, and in this distinction lay both their triumphs and their ordeals.

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