Placing God: Defining “Post-Christianity” for Contemporary Japanese Christians

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Placing God: Defining “Post-Christianity” for Contemporary Japanese Christians

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Abstract

This work suggests that we consider a new, working definition of post-Christianity. This new paradigm is in response to Western Christian thought being too dominant a force that fails to take into enough account other global experiences—like those of Japanese Christians. These reflections are based on scholarly opinions claiming that Christianity is a “global culture,” and ultimately argues for more international inclusivity in Western Christian thought and institutions, especially regarding the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, this paper illuminates how *iitoko dori* allows Christian thought to peacefully coexist in Japan’s greater society. The research also explores specific Japanese cultural practices that make it hard for Japanese Christians to coexist with their communities, in hopes to provide insight on possible ways for Japanese Christians to better live in harmony with their fellow community members. The work marks a shift in Christian missiology and, with other scholarship, turns us toward a broader view of Christianity with the context of a “global culture.” The current status of Japanese Christianity reveals that Japan is a particular and unique post-Christian state regarding Christian intellectual history.

**Keywords:** identity, transculturalism, *iitoko dori*, enculturation, modernity, Japanese-Christianity, Postmodernism, Post-Christianity
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Introduction

We must move beyond the conventional framework which is governed by the assumption that what happened in the course of Western Christendom is universally normative for Christian history. - William Shenk

How do we think about a popular world religion when it enters new cultural contexts? Do we ignore it as some unnecessary offshoot, or do we include it in the greater discourse of how a religion propagates throughout the world? And are these new forms of religion legitimate sources of original doctrine? These questions arise out of my research based on the social impact that Christianity has had on Japan, the indigenously Shinto and socially Buddhist/Neo-Confucian nation-state. Indeed, those with Japanese and non-Japanese identities have grappled with wrapping their heads around including Christianity —presumably a Western religion— into their Asian perspective for over 470 years.

In this time period, however, Christianity has never become a major religion in Japan, with only one percent of Japan identifying as followers of Jesus living in the realm of Shinto. Certain scholars conclude that the “faith” concept in Christianity actually translates well, at least at the level of the unconscious. This highlights the odd relationship between the two religions—

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3 Endo Shusaku states: “The theme of the unconscious was prominent in Eastern writing long before it was taken up in western literature. Since about the 5th century A.D. one of the sects of Buddhism divided the human soul into several levels, drawing a sharp distinction between the conscious and unconscious worlds. In contrast to this, western Christianity has tended to view the world of the unconscious as belonging to the realm of evil (a belief that has influenced the works of Freud) and, as such, heretical. Even the Spanish mystics, who touched on the concept of the unconscious world, failed to treat it seriously, and it was left to Buddhism to claim that it is the unconscious which lies at the heart of man. . . .”

Christianity commingling with Buddhism during Tokugawa Ieyasu’s reign (arguably the most brutal of the Tokugawa shogun) and persisting until today. However, Roger Davies et al posits that their “tethering,” that of Christianity and Japanese— is because of Shinto precepts, all to say that Christianity has actually gained a foothold in contemporary Japanese society. We will mark this when we study what really is going with Christianity today, near the end of the work. But it is here we will mark the beginnings of a post-Christianity, as Christ’s “Great Commission” came to pass through the Jesuits work during the Tokugawa era as interpreted through the lens illustrated in the Gospel of Matthew.

In this project, post-Christianity is more about the effects Christianity has had in other realms like Japan, or Africa, particularly after the modern period. Specifically, this work will highlight Japan’s unique religious perspective in a section on iitoko dori, the country’s transcultralist, cosmopolitain ethic, making Japan capable of indigenizing a foreign religion into its body politic. However, we will realize after some analysis that this creates a particular contention in the Japanese-Christian identity that makes the philosophical “Problem of God” unique to the Japanese cultural context, all the while without losing the nature of what is to be Japanese (日本人論, nihonjin-ron “Japaneseness” or “Japanese theory”). At any rate, the key pedagogical difference between the two religions lies between the authoritative “Commandment”

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5 Paraphrasing Menegon’s translation, another correlative like this is how Matteo Ricci “tethered” Christ and the Chinese dialectic in order to create the presence of God in the Chinese experience.
6 I would cite a particular publisher’s New Living Translation of the Holy Bible, but quite surprisingly and due to legalities, citation formats would have caused a conflict of interest.
structure in Abrahamic texts that do not coincide with the more “suggestive” natures to say Buddhism—nonetheless the non-absolutist, animistically conscious Shintoist mythos ingrained in Japanese people’s minds since birth, respectively.

So what is Christianity doing in a country that has trouble “translating” its holy narrative? What exactly is it doing in Japan, the spiritual realm of Shinto? And what do people of Japan today think about this? Some authors have struggled with accepting both their Japanese and their Christianity, since to believe in both at several points in Japanese history would have meant betraying one’s country and/or identity. Their various commentaries highlight the complex essence of Japanese nationalism, which I have discussed in an unpublished paper I wrote surveying Christianity in Japan throughout the modern era, and up until the 1990s. I will cite observations I recorded in that work throughout this paper as well— and have made it available to read via a link in the footnotes.

To be sure, the idea behind Japanese nationalism, like America and Christianity in a lot of ways— has a lot to do with Shinto being the national religion that a Japanese subject/citizen must adhere to in one way or another. Japan is a team sport, in that the Japanese identity is a collective one as much as it lives in the individual endearing to participate in that collective. It is an intimate social space developed by the “group aesthetic” (集団意識, shudanishiki, “group consciousness”) highly prevalent in Shinto precepts —thus, Japanese society. When based

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against the individualist Christian narrative posited by the West in the modern era,\(^{12}\) we can continue to develop a sense of intellectual history regarding the manner in which Christianity coalesced in such a different universe from its own. Interestingly enough, we will also see how indeed Christianity and a Shinto nation-state actually makes for a legitimate environment for Christian thought to develop in the postmodern era.

Some scholars have introduced to the world a particular Japanese Christianity that both appreciates the story of Christ as well his principles. This slew of authors includes scholars of both Christianity and Japanese theology attempting to solve ontological problems particular to the postwar Japanese experience. Particularly, we will investigate theories posited by Tanabe Hajime, who evoked a new philosophy where Japan creates a “natural” Christian culture. He did this without forsaking the Japanese mindset—including Asian theology and philosophy—all in order to educate natives on if and how Christ lived in the Japanese mind.\(^{13}\) We will also discuss Hajime’s reliance on Christian precepts to pull the country out of the ravages of war.\(^{14}\) However in this example, we will analyze how it was only by transplanting Asian knowledge into Christian precepts that any reception (and frankly, any perception) of Christianity came to pass. Because of this stipulation, the Christian faith being “Japanized” further decentralizes Christianity from the Western status quo.

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\(^{12}\) “Protestantism enlarged upon this [new] idea [in Meiji Japan]…diligence and work based on the individualism of a God-fearing person, and for that reason, it is often associated with the flowering of capitalism.”


And if we were to look deeper at how Christ is seen in the majority of the Japanese population, the general view is heavily determinant upon an extremely dubious sense of fear. There is also the sense that, as of 2020, Christianity—the Palestinian religion\(^{15}\)—is solely from the West.\(^{16}\) This applies to the Japanese experience for as much as this paper critiques modern, Orientalist perspectives on identity.\(^{17}\) It is because this oppressive notion is not only misconceived, but it’s also now stuck in the throes of what Western religious scholars deem the “problem” of post-Christanity.\(^{18}\) For instance, John O’Sullivan marks what he terms as “post-Christian,” but his arguments lie in where traditional Christian precepts no longer hold hegemonic dominance in the world. This is all despite modern missiology in the West being a replete, subtextual Christian movement when considering the religion’s contemporary influence on the world.

All, at least, according to the Western hermeneutic approach, where to O’Sullivan, post-Christanity means that too many secular ideas have entered into the Faith—or have taken to Christian ideas for the sake of ceremony alone.\(^{19}\) These secular “additions” to Christian ritual in Christian’s daily lives in “Christian countries” forsake committing to the more “traditionally Christian” aspects to the faith universally, according to O’Sullivan. Thus, he says we are living in a time where Christianity is no longer relevant, harkening to the Book of Revelations—


\(^{16}\) Most participants in this study confirm this, based on a 3-year study on Christianity in Japan consisting of interviews taken by “Nobita from Japan” a native Japanese researcher on YouTube.

\(^{17}\) Suggested readings: Shela Burney comments on the whole idea behind Orientalist and the world that looks a lot like who we are as a Post-Colonial world. These ideas were coined by the transnational Palestinian academic, Edward Said, dealing with the crisis of identity in his people after the British occupation.


O’Sullivan, web article.
Simply put, O'Sullivan is only right that Christianity is in a post-Christian state, but he is mistaken about the manner in which it actually is. Post-Christianity is not about the degradation of Christ's teachings in the postmodern world, nor is it about if Christianity was an official religion of a given world entity, like the West. It is not so self-reflexive.

Post-Christianity is, with regards to Japan, about how rapidly Westernizing during the 19th century (i.e. Japan’s particular attempt to Christian-ize) has resulted in Japan’s current postmodern Christian experience, at least phenomenologically speaking. In this way, we are considering the experience of others’ experiences, a modus of this era. Theologically speaking, we will analyze how these societies adapted the Word of God into their respective cultures, now that the Gospel has entered into their particular contemporary cultural context.

Finally, post-Christianity highlights the fact that Christianity can no longer rely on Western ideology to enhance belief in the faith, but is better served to include all globally Christian contexts in the movement’s search for universal truth in Christ’s unconditional love. Lastly, this paper also aims to help Japanese denizens and Western scholars bridge the gap between “Japanese” and “Christian” —the theory of what is to be either or both— for the sake of respecting individuality within “the honored group.”

**The Origins and Subcultures of Japanese Christianity: Toward a New Paradigm**

Scholars have all studied Japanese Christianity to a great extent, detailing the many subcultures therein the island country, somehow still finding ways to pay respect to Christ. For instance, Mark Mullins wrote an extensive text detailing the different subcultures to Japanese

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20 O’Sullivan, web article.
Christianity, noting the peculiarity of a religion who touts universal truth as being so systematically diverse. There are the traditional sects, stemming from the Catholic tradition, as well as the newer founded by Japanese leaders. Meiji thinkers like Uchimura Kanzo brought his “churchless Christianity” (無教会, mukyokai) to the foray in order to make a system that facilitated more Japanese dialectical methods to teach the Christian Way.

*Mukyokai* is significant when juxtaposed to the Dutch educational institution, heavily based on Christianity, who firmly established the modus to modernize in Meiji Japan, according to Irwin Scheiner’s discussion on Christian samurai in the Meiji Restoration. Today, the faith has over 35,000 members, and we will discuss Uchimura’s contributions to Christianity in his section later. Emiko Mase-Hasegawa notes the way a famous “Third Generation” author battled between being Japanese and being Catholic, writing books to a Japanese audience with “naturally” different conceptual ‘affinities’ toward the “spiritual.” In essence, by following both Japanese and Christian precepts in his novels, Shusaku created a “theology through fiction,” making a way for the universal “truth” of Christ to be represented through literary expressions of the Post-War Japanese experience. Altogether, these scholars participated in the creation of a new Christian paradigm that facilitated the Japanese identity more than the West ever could.

This new paradigm of “global Christianity” and its apparent “subcultural” decentralization stands in contrast to Sullivan’s notes. This new “post” status stands against the notions that 1) the West is the authority which gauges Christianity throughout the world; and 2)

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that Christianity is no longer relevant. Unlike this “defeatist” form of “post-Christianity,” my particularly postmodern, developmental model, views Christianity through a global lens, highlighting where the religion is situated in intellectual history during a particular era. The postmodern era is a time when definitions of selfhood and finding “truth and goodness” are not cast by institutional authority—like the obsolete modern perspective leading to WWI and II. Selfhood is now acknowledged to be sought out by the agency provided by an enjoining of individual and social experiences -- which must include contemporary cultural contexts, not just tired traditions.

The idea behind finding “one’s truth” is a hallmark of the postmodern era, which allows one to critique oppressive modernist ideas concerning a presupposed universal truth for all. Any idea concerning a “Christian devolution,” as in Sullivan’s piece, misses the mark, failing to acknowledge Christianity as a “global citizenry” with various prescient and legitimate perspectives. Simply put, Sullivan and all Western Christians do not speak for all Christians around the globe. Also, the more the idea of Christ is ingrained in people who see the world differently from the West, the more the Christian institution becomes “decentralized.” However, I do not use this term pejoratively, since I believe this is telling a larger story.

Decentralizing the institutional narrative that excludes identities—instead of qualifying them—leaves room for more perspectives to expand and enhance “the Faith.” Therefore, this enhancement fills a research gap, by what I define as post-Christianity. It is a state of Christianity evolved past the historically authoritative rhetoric monopolized by the West seen in previous forms of its timeline.\textsuperscript{25} The faith is now a global experience, no longer resting on the

\textsuperscript{25} Mase-Hasegawa, 14.
laurels of the modern era that held such a firm grip on the religion’s primary, universal “truths.”

It is a “world religion” and Western scholars should follow suit. Christianity in Japan makes demographics like these something more—and we will discuss how in the next section.

**Christianity in Japan: Subculture or Something More?**

Accepting that we are living in a post-Christian state, how does Japan deal with being one of these global identities? Is Japan itself an identity? And is not Christianity a global movement? It is widely accepted—most likely for the wrong reasons—the West holds the monopoly on Christian thought, and continues to ignore other representations of Christianity in other cultural contexts:

In response to the modern missionary movement from Western Europe and North America, Asians and Africans have organized numerous independent churches and movements in an effort to disengage Christianity from its Eurocentric orientation and relativize the transplanted “vernacular” forms. These expressions of Christianity cannot be understood as simple extensions of European and American mission churches, as they are often viewed in the West.26

With this, what I think is underrepresented in scholarship—a gap, if you will—is that this paradigm is actually another sign of post-Christianity, and it is not problematic—unlike what Sullivan argued. Globalization does bring more secular ideas into more closed groups, yes, but it also offers us insight into paring down the role of the West and its monopoly on global narratives—even with institutions that have left the West and entered into other dichotomies;

let’s say, Japan. If anything, I hope to build a rhetoric that legitimizes a new kind of Christianity that appreciates the future of the religion in the here and now and interweaves a contemporary matrix of post-Christianity with culture, society, and nationhood.

Mark Mullins work helps us to see the problem with Japan being subsumed by the larger paradigm of Christianity. He acknowledges this going rhetoric that scholars like Sullivan promote, where the West sees itself as the dominant voice in Christianity. His arguments compel the question: is it not problematic to say that Christianity in Japan is “subordinate” to the greater Christian narrative in the West? Is not Christianity a “global culture,” as opposed to “a Western religion that’s spread around the world?” His first chapter, “Christianity as a World Religion and Vernacular Movement,” helps us to understand how Christianity dominates religious conversation, as well as where Japan fits in all of this. As a scholar who has grown up in both Japan and learning the Gospel, his distinct take on the state of Christ in Japan suggest prescient considerations when discussing the religion in non-Christian cultures altogether. He is mainly concerned with how cultures facilitate a capacity to appropriate foreign elements or “making something foreign one’s own.”27

I also would like to note Mullins’ use of the term “subculture” when referring to Japanese Christianity. While his main arguments align with mine, it is his use of the word itself that could be misleading. Japanese Christianity is Christianity, and using the word “subculture” may suggest the positionality of Japanese Christians as more subordinated to a perceived “larger framework” built by the West—Japan, merely an asterisk rather than a legitimate source of Christian precepts. I don’t suggest at all this is what Mullins intended to say, but I do think it is important to see these implications.

27 Mullins, 2.
Resolutely, Japanese Christians are a definitive type of Christian, not merely an inferior or “subtextual” experience beholden to a “greater narrative.” Ultimately, I think this is what Mullins is saying. Maintaining a postmodern lens for this work, I would suggest a term that is more inclusive in which Japanese and Christianity are more equally weighted, or just a shift in perspective to where Japanese Christianity is interchangeable with Christianity as a holistic concept or truth. This might suggest an “identity tethering,” mending fractures brought to it by social stigmas fostered during the modern era. It is much like W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double-consciousness” narrative identity theory in 19th and 20th Century African Americans. We will discuss how exactly this “identity tethering” works when we discuss post-Christianity in Shusaku Endo’s works.

Essentially, Christianity in Japan may not consistently look like Christianity in the USA or Europe. Mullins begins his observations by investigating what scholars have deemed “global cultures, drawing attention to the dialectic between the “universal” and “particular” in the process of cross-cultural transmission.” Simply put, “a global culture is a tradition that travels the world and takes on local color.” Also by the “Great Commission” being for believers to “Go out into all the world” to preach the Word of God, it would seem the religion is poised to become in fact “global,” in the sense that it would take on local color. And again, this goes well with Shinto, in so far as it becomes “unconsciously” communicative given Shinto’s receptivity to new cultures. At any rate, Mullins establishes the aim of global cultures as the spreading of a certain “meta-culture” that is “perfectly capable of remaining identifiable while being absorbed

30 Mullins, 2.
31 See footnote 3 for Endo Shusaku’s Jungian perspective on this matter.
by local cultures.” Therefore, if we accept the notion that Christianity is a “global culture,” it should be safe to acknowledge it as recognizable, even if in a culture different from the established “norm.” It should be safe to say there is Japanese Christianity. As such, this may something more about Christianity, then it does Japan— or anywhere else. I find it odd that is not the more accepted, Western quotidian.

In Japan, this would mean Christianity naturally becomes Japanese in that context, however— and should not be disregarded as syncretic or too secular. We could say, in this fashion, there is a particular American or European style to Christianity— again, the Palestinian religion— as there would be anywhere else. Yet, Mullins’ “global culture” suggests that Christianity has a propensity to see each “global citizen” as the same— defending newer cultures to the faith from being forgotten or persecuted by the establishment. This new “meta-ideal” in the postmodern is both socially and theologically sound when considering Christianity’s contemporary development in Japan. Japanese Christians still rely on the Holy Bible and Christ’s last and greatest instruction in the Book of Matthew as to spread his Word throughout the world.

On the other hand, Mullins’ continues by saying Christianity combined with local or indigenous forms (like Shinto or Buddhism) “can be designated as part of a larger world religion,” just by the very nature of Japanese people being themselves. This is because we can identify “striking continuities over time and space” that, altogether, create places like Japan as a

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33 Here, it especially important to consider the growth of the Christian church, given with its origins in Palestine. Concurrently, Palestinian Christians, among other religious sects, are under fire— given the recent conflicts between Israel-Hamas, May 2021.

religious “metaculture.”34 It is in this that I find the seeds of a post-Christian ideal in the greater Christian faith via its inception and integration into Japan. By “continuities,” Mullins is referring to non-Western identities, whom after indigenizing Christianity, follow the same universal texts (like the Holy Bible, Koran, Talmud, etc.). These texts are foundational to a given religion existing in tandem with local “carriers” spreading it—be it through migration, missions and proselytization, or institutional participation.

For example, we can see all this in Christian institutions, like schools, universities, and churches in Japan, all paying homage to both Christian and Japanese histories and cultures in the modern day.35 Thus, these particular identities create a “metaculture” that both appreciates their native, everyday life, while also accepting a foreign religion’s more universal tenants. So, with Mullins’ idea of Japanese Christianity creating a new Christian/Japanese metaculture, his arguments point to “cultural authenticity,” or how we come to make and call conceptual ideas like religion and culture as “legitimate” or “official.” By considering this, we can understand more about ontology via the epistemology of Japanese selfhood: we will know more about how we come to know and become more. As such, Wilbert Shenk’s observations quoted at the beginning of this piece is a call-to-action to move toward what I’m defining as post-Christianity—an awareness of modern Christianity in the colorfully global locales of the here and now.

And in quoting James Heisig, Mullins furthers an argument for how Christianity is authentic in different cultural contexts: “. . . so is the vernacular orientation needed to loosen the

34 Mullins, 2, my emphasis.
35 This video is an example of contemporary Japanese churches, showcasing Grace Community Church in Tokyo. Redeemer City to City, “Grace Harbor Church, Tokyo, 2015,” (Tokyo, Japan: Grace Harbor Church, 2015), Youtube.
hold that one particular time or culture or way of thinking has on teachings held sacred in order that they might enter other times and circumstances freely.”36 Thus, when it comes to Japanese selfhood, Christianity is a viable source to that end, blossoming “freely” in the Japanese context, or so it should.

In the final section, we will look at some stories told by natives in interviews conducted by a native Japanese researcher in order to examine this phenomenon. The results essentially will tell us how Christianity has been constrained in the Japanese context and how this still evokes our going definition of the post-Christian. At any rate, accepting the notion that Japanese Christianity as “authentically Christian” also further delegitimizes Sullivan’s definition of post-Christianity. He presumptuously speaks on behalf of all Christians— the typical Western-Christian perspective. Furthermore, accepting Christianity as “authentically Japanese” is a highlight of Japanese culture, and the topic of our next section.

Taking the Best of Things: Iitoko dori or Japan’s Transcultural Disposition

So how do we assert what is most culturally authentic about ourselves? What if some of those things we hold so dearly to our identity come from cultures different from our own? First, we can consider Mullins’ analysis, and how it helps us to better clarify the idea of “the authentic” and “cultural authenticity” in religion. Japan can be seen as a Christian nation, and, by drawing from the Western perspective, the country created its own version of the historically Palestinian religion.37 As the country receiving new cultural transmissions, Japan is the area we need to take

more into account considering what we perceive when we talk about Christianity as a global culture.

In order to analyze the concept of authenticity, we must look at important cultural concepts in Japan that illustrate “the authentic” in the Japanese way. The country has a long history of transplanting foreign cultural components into its native makeup, like technology, industry, and fashion. In fact, making foreign things “Japanese” is an essential characteristic to the “authentic” Japanese experience. Called *iitoko dori* (いいとこ取り, which is literally “taking the best of things”), this cultural concept highlights Japan’s disposition towards the cosmopolitan in order to maintain social harmony.

Continuing our discussion with Mullins, *iitoko dori* is when Japan takes on what the nation deems the most lucrative of foreign concepts coming into the country, then somehow making them “authentically Japanese.” A more colloquial translation of *iitoko dori* is “cherry picking.” Thus, while the idea still does provide for some unexpected societal consequences, *iitoko dori* is the Japanese people’s natural talent for taking on new cultural ideas with a notable flexibility uncommon in Asia. In fact, I and others, like Roger Davies, a Professor of Japanese cultural history, have argued that *iitoko dori* allowed Japan to be so successful at modernizing during the Meiji era when compared to their counterparts in China, Korea, Singapore, and others, at the time.

Davies edited a book on Japanese culture that illustrates the essence of *iitoko dori*. He discusses how this essential Japanese trait is based on solving the influx of new religions. While *iitoko dori* applies to an infinite amount of foreign artifacts and concepts Japanese identities

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39 Davies., 127.
could potentially acquire and modify as their own, the concept truly began to take shape during the 6 and 7th century. At this time in Japan, Prince Shotoku, the emperor, ran into a particular problem in which Buddhism, as well as Confucianism from China, undermined the imperial Shinto authority.\textsuperscript{40} In Shinto doctrine, imperial authority in Japan is historically given to the emperor, based on their “blood connection to the Shinto Gods, starting with the historical Emperor Jimmu.\textsuperscript{41} Shinto is “The Way of the Gods,” whereas Buddhism and Confucianism do not attribute the same fealty to the Japanese emperor. But as Japanese people progressively believed in these imported religions, they followed their native religion less and less.

Thus, this situation undercut the emperor’s religious authority. As these ideas continued to create a conflict of interest, Prince Shotoku avoided the upending of the state by making these three religions the official religions of the Japanese nation-state. In a decree after taking up the regency, he stated that “Shinto is the trunk, Buddhism is the branches, and Confucianism is the leaves.”\textsuperscript{42} This historical move toward a more universalist approach to a religious state is the basis for the Japanese essence of \textit{iitoko dori}. Prince Shotoku began a tradition in Japan that favored the cosmopolitain over the absolute. And in doing so, he made a religious state that is uniquely Japanese.

So with all this, let us argue that \textit{iitoko dori} is a \textit{Shinto} principle, concerned with accepting new ideas and morphing them into an authentic \textit{Japanese} aesthetic. Again, it is through Shintoism that we can gain a sense of \textit{iitoko dori} in the everyday life of the Japanese. Davies notes that “Shinto contains no absolute sense of values, such as ‘the words and rules of

\textsuperscript{40} Davies, 127-128.
\textsuperscript{41} A page on Japan’s first Emperor.
\textsuperscript{42} Davies, 128.
God’ in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and this has enabled [Shintoism] to coexist with other value systems that have entered Japan from the outside.”

“The Way of the Gods” does not have the more commonly known sense of absolutism and rules, as in Christian traditions. Thus, if it was not for Shinto, there would not be any Japanese Christianity, as there would have not been any precedent for Buddhism nor Confucianism in Japan without the concept. Therefore, since Shintoism allows the Japanese to enact *iitoko dori*, Japan is one of the best environments to facilitate new religions. So, as we will note in our discussion of Emiko Mase-Hasegawa’s book, Japanese people are essentially predisposed to be more cosmopolitan in their acquiescence with foreign ideas. Furthermore, in making these foreign concepts “native,” Japanese people have even enhanced or improved upon the “original” concepts due to their unique perspective stemming from the lack of absolutism in Shinto.

So what does this mean when we consider a Christianity as “authentically Japanese?” How does this hallmark our going definition of post-Christianity? Well, it is because the idea behind *iitoko dori* is essentially to make something foreign resolutely Japanese; it takes on the contemporary and shapes it into a concept or artifact even more inclusive to those who may be seen as the Other. Japan takes the best of ideas and places their own twist on them. Even though Christianity in Japan has had a minor effect on the Japanese experience, the Christian institution is thoroughly placed between the collective interstices of social experience in Japan. And this is all because of *iitoko dori*, Japan’s propensity to include new ideas to help shape its national identity.

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43 Davies, 128.
44 Davies, 127-128.
For instance, some of the most prestigious universities in the country, where it is a definitive Japanese quotidian, are Christian-based private colleges fostered by Japanese Christian scholars. Contemporary Baptist, Pentecostal, and other Christian services are held in Japanese, led by Japanese ministers catering to the Japanese experience in their sermons, just like in the West. Popular iconography of Jesus has been painted in traditional Japanese stylings by historical Japanese artists, a literal image of iitoko dori in critical effect. Therefore, we cannot discount the importance of iitoko dori when we research the social impact of Christianity in Japan, as without the flexible propensity for the cosmopolitan in Japanese people, there may not have been a Christianity in Japan to discuss.

Churchless Christianity: Uchimura Kanzo and Developing a Christianity for Japan

While this concept of iitoko dori allows for an integration of Christianity into Japan, at the same time, there is an ongoing dialectic—and at times, dissonance—that marks the process. Just as Tanabe Hajime’s work creates a dialectic about the difficulty and rewards in integrating Christianity into the Japanese identity, so does that of Uchimura Kanzo, the creator of a distinct, yet authentic Japanese-Christianity. In 1901, Uchimura Kanzo developed his mukyokai (無教会, “Nonchurch Movement“)— essentially Christianity taught in the Japanese/Chinese style of education, common to Japan. In another article by Mark Mullins, he states that “Uchimura’s

45 Note: Here is an example of one the premier Christian universities in Tokyo, illustrating how even in Japan’s most sacred capital that Christian influence is thoroughly embedded in Japanese culture.


46 City Harvest Church. CityWorship: My Church My Life (Japanese) マイチャーチ マイライフ, 2016. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSZ4jmY42qQ.

version of Christianity was a Confucian one, grafted onto bushidō, and had particular appeal to
the educated members of Japanese society.”⁴⁸ In a biography by John Howes, he states, “It was
through his writings that Uchimura taught his version of the Christian tradition . . . [his thoughts]
dealt with him coming to terms with the tensions of being modern Japanese and also a
Christian.”⁴⁹ Today, the movement has over 35,000 active members whose identities must
contend with the various issues pertaining to living this particular sort of double-life. We will
keep returning to this theme as we move through more recent histories pertaining to this topic.

But how did he do it? Uchimura Kanzo was born in 1861, just prior to the fall of the
Tokugawa Shogun and the opening of Japan to Western influences. In John Howe's biography on
Uchimura, he says “. . . [t]he social foundations of Japan were being challenged on all fronts.
The attitude of the ordinary citizen was changing and the worth of the individual and his
relationship to society and the divine was being reassessed. This reassessment created a tension
between seemingly opposing priorities.”⁵⁰ Uchimura confronted these head on, even going so far
as performing a sort of betrayal towards his own people. In Samuel Lee’s selected readings from
Uchimura Kanzo, Uchimura said that “accepting Christianity meant being a traitor to Japan.”⁵¹
This makes sense, as the Meiji era he was born in fostered a deep nationalistic ideal expected in
all Japanese denizens. But Uchimura overcame the odds, and like a prophet, foresaw the shift
Christianity would take in the archipelago.

It is here that I would like to note Uchimura’s “transcendental ontology” when regarding
his take on Christianity—so that it may work in Japan. I believe his take on Christianity is a

⁴⁸ Mark R. Mullins, “Kagawa Toyohiko (1888–1960) and the Japanese Christian Impact on American Society,” in
Encountering Modernity, eds. Albert L. Park and David K. Yoo. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014).
⁴⁹ James Powell, “Uchimura’s Life,” webpage, my emphasis
⁵⁰ Powell, Webpage.
Hallmark example of post-Christianity. Uchimura’s exegetical methods were based on the traditional Chinese and Japanese methods of education—not the Western style mass or church ceremonies fostered by the Dutch that educated him. The Dutch were strictly there to Westernize Japan via educating the Japanese in the “arts and sciences.” But what also makes it post-Christian is where in history his interpretations were formed, and how they are theologically legitimate—as well as legitimately “global.” In response to the extreme nationalist ethic of the Meiji Era and into the Taisho, Uchimura did not forsake the West—nor the essence of Christian discourse—and decided to continue his studies in America, earning a degree in Theology from an American college.

He then brought back the idea of Christ to the Japanese experience. In his system, “students” would meet with their “sensei” at their home, and hold church in a more intimately Japanese setting, instead of a large Western cathedral or chapel—thus, in a sense, it is “Church without church,” on account of the Japanese experience. This coupled with his experiences with Japanese missionaries and Christianity in the United States led to a truly innovative interpretation of the Christian tradition that was particularly relevant to his fellow Japanese struggling to live a Christian life. Even though his opponents could not agree on the grounds that Uchimura apostatized from Shintoism, he still opted to create a universalist theology for Japanese people that did not forsake the essence of the Japanese personhood—using Asian practices to teach the Word of God. However, as we will discuss in the next section, introducing the idea of God into the Japanese dialectic was not always as smooth a process, as we will see in the philosophy of Tanabe Hajime.

Solving the “Problem of God” in Asian Theology and Philosophy

Tanabe Hajime is an important figure because he illustrates an important dialectic: the ongoing push and pull between Japanese identity and Christianity. Some scholars have introduced to the world a particular Japanese Christianity that both appreciates the story of Christ and his principles. This slew of authors includes scholars of both Christianity and Japanese theology attempting to solve the problem of God— as posited by Hajime evoking a new philosophy where Japan creates a “natural” Christian culture. They do this without forsaking the Japanese mindset— including Asian theology and philosophy— all in order to educate native lay persons on the story of Christ. While certain Japanese scholars in the past looked at how Japan relied on Christian precepts to pull the country out of the ravages of war, in this example, we will analyze how Hajime grappled with the notion of transplanting Asian knowledge into Christian precepts.

Now, in Christianity, is it sinful to learn Japanese, a language based on what we could term a completely different spiritual realm? The Japanese language and culture is based on Shinto principles, whereas the entire history of Japanese people is based on this polytheistic religion. Cannot one argue that this invariably creates a philosophical and theological conundrum? And how do people grapple with the notion of introducing new concepts of the divine into their native personhood? Thus, solving these sort of philosophical “Problems with God” in different cultural contexts is calling attention to any and all new issues present when a

54 See; Anselm and “Ontology”
55 Nobuko Kamimura discusses the importance of Confucianism in the Japanese language, something “ungodly” in Christian discourse. However, it truly shows the cosmopolitanism in our now much more globalized society.

new religion is transplanted into another culture. Mullins’ notion of the “global” is at least under
the assumption that the West holds a perceived monopoly on the deepest concepts of Christ. But
some Japanese still took it upon themselves to try to grapple with a foreign entity called the
Christian God.

For example, Hajime, a scholar of the Kyoto School of Philosophy and student of Hegel,
attempted to bridge Japanese thought with Christianity for the benefit of understanding what
Christ was doing in the Post-War Japanese psyche. While he fails to find a solid conclusion to
the “impulse” of God in the Japanese mind, his writings illustrate a fervent attempt to bring
Christ (as seen by the West) into the Japanese social schema. James Heisig details Tanabe’s
ideas, evoking that while he did fail to truly assess how God interacts with the Japanese mind, he
did successfully open a conversation on the matter within Japanese philosophical circles and
abroad. Heisig writes about Tanabe’s “hollow” representation of God in the Japanese mind,
stating that “The simplest explanation is that Tanabe’s God talk is tied too closely to a forbidding
style that makes his philosophical writings difficult to approach.”56

However, Heisig goes on to say that he “cannot believe that is all there is to it.”57
After toiling with the idea of God for years, Tanabe created a discourse on repentance, or
The Metanoetics, in order to reconcile Japan’s historic loss to the Allied Powers. The
Metanoetics is about how Japan had to “repent, for they had lost their moral fiber,”
helping “to bring about Japan’s defeat,” preserving any semblance of nationhood left in
the Japanese mind.58 With regards to Tanabe’s shaky conception of God, Hesig states that
“the problem is that, with the possible exception of the postwar repentance of The

University Press, 2019), 274.
57 Heisig, 274.
58 Heisig, 274.
Metanoetics, Tanabe’s readers do not feel a sense of companionship with the questions that drove him.”59 They did not agree with what Tanabe surmised of his country — a mindset that included their former enemy’s God, which did not fit as easily into their postwar perception as easily as it did for Tanabe. Japanese scholars could not conceive of the kind of God Christianity promoted, even though Tanabe used Asian theology and religion to introduce the idea of the Western Christ to the Japanese people— much like Uchimura.

Andrew Barshay details Post-War thought from Hajime’s call for a “collective repentance.”60 Hajime utilized Christian thought to help illustrate his arguments regarding a way for Japan to “repent” from the “sin” of “failure to sacrifice life, limb, and material necessities to the war effort.”61 In Zangedō toshite no Tetsugaku (“Philosophy of Metanoetics,” 1946),62 Hajime explains his trouble with “indecision over whether to criticize the wartime government at the risk of ‘causing divisions and conflicts among [the Japanese] people.’”63 Tanabe “had let go and surrendered himself to [his] own inability.”64 Barshay notes that “This act of self-surrender led Tanabe “through metanoia, or the way of zange, to a philosophy that is not a philosophy: philosophy seen as the realization of the metanoetic consciousness” Japan was to undertake.65

Philosophically, metanoetic consciousness is that of repentance in order to find a societal peace toward a then new Post-War Japan. Metanoetics details what Tanabe calls Other-power

59 Heisig, 274.
61 Barshay, 274.
62 Or what I’m thinking he was intending as The Metanoetics, with Tanabe being a student of Hegel, possibly paying homage to his philosophical background.
63 Barshay, 274.
64 Barshay, 274.
65 Barshay, 274, my emphasis.
(tariki), or having God enter the Otherness of Asian thought—and vice versa—where thoughts
“like morality, can provide a way to a universal philosophy.” In other words, this kind of
spiritual cognition can lead to a more philosophical understanding of Christ in the
metaphysically nuanced Japanese context. In one argument Tanabe makes in his later Post-War
writings, he cites the prophet Jeremiah, stating:

One step in the wrong direction, even one day’s delay, may be enough to spell the
total ruin of our land. Unless we all undertake the new way of zange, free
ourselves from the evil institutions of the past, and collaborate in carrying out
whatever changes are necessary in the social system, there is no possibility of
reconstruction. The only course open to us at present is metanoetics . . . Does not
the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah show us the way? 

Here, Tanabe bravely expresses the appeal of the Old Testament to a Japanese audience.
He not only attempts to deal with the country in shambles, but also asserts that the old
Asiatic religions need Christian thought to find solace in Japan’s new state after the war.
This was seen as especially true, given how heavily the Supreme Commander of the
Allied Forces attempted to guide Japan into a more Christian future. Tanabe’s
arguments suggest the idea that Christianity was already so indigenized in Japan that it
was well worth the effort to follow SCAP’s efforts to re-Christianize Japan.

However, zangedō also appreciated Pure Land Buddhist ethics (i.e. Other-power)
to help illuminate the Christian God in an Asian context. James Heisig states that
“Despite criticisms of the Christian God, Tanabe gradually transformed the notion in the
light of his rediscovery of Buddhist thought and the elaboration of ideas of absolute

66 Barshay, 274.
67 Barshay, 275.
68 Thomas Jolyon, “Religions Policies During the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945-1952),” in Religions Compass,
no. 9 (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 275.
nothingness, the cultural specificity of rationality, and historical praxis.”69 His overall ideas concerning a metanoetic Japan “transformed into a “nothingness-in-love” (i.e., possibly a “Buddha-in-Christ”) and the appeal to supporting Christian ideas became a regular feature in his writings.”70

I argue this is post-Christian because Tanabe needed a way to communicate Christ in a Japanese context that, in spite of de-centering the Christian ethic, appreciated the cosmopolitan nature of the Japanese people. In essence, if Japanese people are going to understand the Law of Christ, it is more than likely going to be through the lens of their locale, as Mullins pointed out in his findings. Thus we could say in a natural move toward iitoko dori, Tanabe opted to foster one of the most prominent Biblical themes—that of repentance—to bring Japan into a more inclusive state that appreciated what the West was attempting to impart upon the world. And as this is a way that Christianity has shaped since the Church was formed, we can call this a post-Christianity, as the real work in fostering the religion happens in these globally micro-demographics. In juxtaposition and extension, we will now discuss a Japanese Christian who verily felt the “impulse” of Christ, and how he alleviated his and other’s personal struggles between Japanese and Christian though his novels.

Tethering Identity: Endo Shusaku’s Literary Theology

Hajime and Uchimura’s writings create a useful foundation through which to assess Endo Shusaku. Exploring the tension between individual faith and community responsibilities,

70 Heisig, 1.
Shusaku almost exclusively wrote about his struggles to reconcile the adamant belief in his people with his humble, yet passionate belief in Christ, according to Emiko Mase-Hasegawa. In *Christ in Japanese Culture: Theological Themes in Shusaku Endo’s Works*, Mase-Hasegawa effectively details the impact Shusaku had on the literary and theological world, regarding the Japanese Christian identity.\(^7^1\) In effect, her work casts light on our ongoing rhetoric regarding the “Post-Christian,” in that Shusaku’s works were speaking to the postmodern Japanese audience, who were expressly unaware of the psychological torture he experienced as a Japanese man born into the Gospel.

Mase-Hasegawa argues that Shusaku’s belief in Christ and his spiritually cathartic novels created freedom from an identity crisis shared by all Japanese-Christians. His texts also attempt to rescue the contemporary Japanese-Christian institution from inherent constraints fostered by living in Japanese culture.\(^7^2\) And in doing so, he became one of the lead figures during the “Third Generation” literary movement in Japan, at one point eyed for the Nobel Prize in Literature -- losing to famed author Kenzaburo Oe in 1994. She states Endo essentially created his own “literary theology” that appreciated religio-cultural diversity.\(^7^3\)

Shusaku’s issues mirrored Tanabe’s, in that he was dealing with a very real “instinct” of God’s existence and attempting to impart these ideas to a Shintoist people through fiction. He also precludes Mullins’ observations: “In finding a new identity as a Japanese-Christian in a


\(^{7^2}\) “Instead of abandoning the suit of western Christianity, Endo tried to reshape it to fit his Japanese body, to reform it in a Japanese style relevant for postwar Japan.”

Mase-Hasegawa, 78.

\(^{7^3}\) “Endo’s theology, implicit in his literary works, brings about the mutual understanding of East and West in spiritual terms through proposing a harmony in diversity.”

Mase-Hasegawa, 191.
wider, harmonious perspective, [Endo] became more convinced that Christianity is not the possession of the West, and that *the scriptures can be interpreted from wider perspectives other than the West.*" Endo is thus a purveyor of post-Christian thought in order to make Christianity applicable to the everyday and essential “Japaneseness” (日本人論, *nihonjinron*):

> In the development of his thought, Endo focused his efforts on *reconciling the Japanese traditional mind with Catholicism.* His works depict the seemingly contradictory practice of religion in Japan of believing at the same time in both God and gods. Through their religious experiences, the Japanese integrate these concepts on the existential level. As Yuki Hideo, a former director at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, states: “To become a Japanese Christian is not to lose Japaneseness.”

All of his work, to her, is truly considering the essence of his people in his search for balance regarding Japanese people’s koshinto— or their respectively instinctual Shinto, effecting Tanabe’s *metanoetics* as logic. In other words, we can say Endo’s works became a sort of “Way to Christ” that appreciated social struggles concerning being natively Japanese and fully being Japanese-Christian. Now, let’s discuss some examples of how he did this and how they foster our sense of the “post-Christian” via global cultures.

To begin, we must establish some important Japanese concepts in order to get a sense for what we mean when we consider fostering Christianity in another, dissimilar cultural context like Japan. One of the main contentions that Shusaku and other Japanese-Christians encountered was in mitigating the Japanese scene of “social harmony” or *wa* (和), as well as “group

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74 Mase-Hasegawa, 139, *my emphasis.*
75 Mase-Hasegawa, 82, *my emphasis.*
consciousness” or *shūdan ishiki* (集団意識). T. Mango writes an account about these

Japanese concepts, like maintaining the social order (*wa*) for the sake of the group before the individual (*shūdan ishiki*). The author defines the concept, stating that,

This concept of harmony was created around 600 BC within a hierarchical structured government. *Each individual knew their place within society and did exactly what was expected of them...*  

And that,

The Japanese still implement this idea within their homes, their schools and their businesses. Even the way they address each other is framed from the level of importance that person is put within their hierarchical structure. *It isn’t seen as oppressive or degrading. It is an understanding that in order for society to work harmoniously, everyone should do what they’re expected to do, address certain people a certain way to show loving care and respect towards others and vice versa.*

The author’s thoughts are sound, in line with Roger Davies’ various notes on the same subjects. Japanese people are expected to follow a certain established way to conduct their livelihoods and interactions with other Japanese people, maintaining a sense of harmonious progress. For example, the theme of the new era commemorated by Emperor Naruhito’s 2019 coronation is “Beautiful Harmony,” which promotes a fresh, “people-focused sense of duty” in contemporary Japanese society.

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76 “The concept of harmony, or *wa*, became an important factor in Japanese life, helping to maintain relationships between members of close-knit communities.”


78 Mango, blog.

79 Mango, blog.


What is important for us to discuss is T. Mango’s note is that *wa* and its “well-ordered” way to Japanese everyday life is not seen as “oppressive” or “degrading.” Again, these authors are speaking for a great number of people, not counting the myriad identities found in Japan. What is also important to note is the sense of “duty” (*giri*, 義理) or social obligation embedded in this theme. In order to maintain social harmony in Japanese society, a citizen must follow the perceived notions that maintain a healthy group consciousness by filling their social obligations, including religious obligation.

And it is here that Japanese Christians find contention with their communities. People like Shusaku Endo were, arguably, oppressed by *wa*, in that they detracted from the Japanese way of life by dedicating themselves to something that negated respect and/or worship of ancestors. In Christianity, that would be deemed idolatry, and maybe even the same can be said of the general reaction of Japanese people toward Japanese-Christians. If a Japanese person does not follow and develop a good sense of *wa*, their community will ostracize that individual. Even though T. Mango said that the idea is not seen as oppressive or degrading, they go on to say that “To do something disruptive can be detrimental to the individual, that can lead to things like shame and stress, not only to the individual but to anybody else that could be affected by it.”

Thus, there is a notable contention brought about by Christianity.

And as the idea of *wa* is natively Japanese, we can also say that it is probably heavily influenced by Shintoism. Thus as Davies put it, where Shinto lacks absolutism, *typical* Japanese society consists of what I call “an absolution of the unwritten.” By this, I mean that where there is a sense of universality toward more abstract concepts like foreign fashions or religious

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traditions, there is a system of policing the identity that is absolutely embedded in Japanese society—especially when it comes to those who fail to follow expectations of the locale. Community shame and degradation is rampant in Japan when a community senses a lack of conformity, especially when one does not follow the status quo in favor of one’s in-group. This includes religious practices, as these practices can qualify as the “ritual to being Japanese,” (ex. ancestor worship during holidays) and not actually being wholeheartedly religious.  

Therefore, it should be clear the kinds of internal struggles people like Shusaku went through, being somewhat outcast from his own people. So, he resorted to writing cathartic love letters to God and Japan via his novels. His belief system grappled with reconciling his religious practice with what was essential to Japanese culture. He did so, even if it meant that practice came from outside Christianity. He found a way to God through writing fiction, where he mended his fractured identity—seen through his work called Silence (1969).

Silence is an historical fiction that presents a view of Japanese Christianity as it pertained to the Jesuit mission during the Tokugawa era. Interestingly, Shusaku aimed to write a story that also resonated with contemporary Japanese Christians ostracized from their ethnic communities. This early postmodern novel exemplifies a post-Christian narrative by showing how re-contextualizing Japanese culture as now Christian, too as the way to indigenize Christ into contemporary Japan. As such, it is reminiscent of Prince Shotoku when he included Confucianism and Buddhism into the country a la iitoko dori.

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83 As we will note in the section on the Japanese Christian experience from native Japanese people and other denizens of Japan, Nobita-san’s findings show that a part of the religious experience in native Japanese people show a more traditional connection to religious practice that is really an appreciation of nationhood—instead of a devoutly religious connection. This is the basis for my thoughts toward a question concerning Japan being in a sort of “post-religious state,” possibly due to the social effects of iitoko dori. However, given the limited scope of this paper, this warrants further study in future research.

The novel also criticizes the West as too authoritative and takes on prescient issues concerning proselytizing in a foreign country. As Mase-Hasegawa claims, “the Japanese people register” as “basic shinto” (小神と) if we are to think of the Japanese indigenously— and why Christianity develops a particular identity crisis in the Japanese individual.84 This is because “Shinto deeply influences the Japanese at the subconscious level of their lives, even when they refuse to take it seriously at the conscious level.”85

Thus, Silence helps to illustrate a new consciousness for Japanese audiences, in that “The Christian situation in Japan leads, however, to a vision of the love of Christ, identifying with the weak one.”86 The book effectually tethers the identity of the Japanese and Christian, standing up for the embodied being. And with Shusaku’s incredible influence on the international stage, it makes sense to deem his attempt at asserting a Japanese Christian legacy in our contemporary time as another way we can view the state of Christianity in Japan as post-Christian. Also, his theological genius was foundational to the message behind his novels, as well as Shusaku's effect internationally. His avid belief in a God who could accept him and his Japanese wholeheartedly as an ever-loving companion allowed Shusaku to make a way for the Christian divine to reach a new level in the postmodern global consciousness.

Christianity in Japan Today

84 Suggested reading: Timothy Iles short work energetically brings readers into the peculiar nuances to the Japanese identity, as in its myriad fashions, exists in a constant state of flux. He investigates how this phenomenon is consistently portrayed in film, and what that says of Japanese society in general. I feel it fits comfortably adjacent to this work’s psycho-sociological focus.


86 Mase-Hasegawa, 100.
Finally, let’s tie everything together, by linking this rhetoric to a contemporary perspective. What does this global “Christian” consciousness look like today in the archipelago? What exactly is the mission in Japan, at least in so far as a contemporary one? Can we agree after this, to call this global initiative post-Christian? To begin, this analysis is in response to Merryn Ekberg’s idea that we are living in a sort of risk society— a kind of “reflexive modernity” humanity now occupies, consisting of a deep preoccupation with mitigating risk.\(^7\) Ekberg’s ideas are heavily based on global movements in Asia. Their research is saying we may have left the postmodern for something newer, yet even more unfortunate than modernity, especially considering the more prescient concerns humanity now faces because of it. I think this is important since we are considering religion and selfhood in the postmodern age.

While his arguments supplement our definition of the postmodern and beyond, we scholars are not done studying postmodernity itself— especially considering how much there is left in searching the history of world religion and human development. Thus, as Donald R. Davies put it, we, as scholars of the Asia Pacific, are attempting to find a theory of Asia, and it is in the endearing search we undertake that creates the meaning behind understanding our greater humanity.\(^8\) It behooves us to continue.

Therefore, I’ve turned to more independent thinkers and educators, like a certain concurrent Japanese YouTuber, to facilitate what seems the most contemporary in regards to research. Paying careful attention to respect an identity and positionality that is not my own, my research had to make up for my lack of interviews of local Japanese people, in which I would have asked them personal questions regarding religion during the strain of a global pandemic.

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Today, Japan is still in an ongoing state-of-emergency that makes all sorts of communication understandably, but extremely difficult. Thus, I crafted my qualitative data primary source analysis by relying on several interviews conducted by a Youtube anthropologist named “Nobita from Japan.”

Nobita-san is a native Japanese citizen who researches common (and not-so-common) cultural practices in Japan, taking down native Japanese people’s answers to questions his followers have for him in his comments and emails. Particularly, a few of his videos from the last few years directly involve the social impact Christianity has had on Japanese people today, drawing fascinating conclusions that further my argument toward a going definition of post-Christianity. I have concluded that on account of Japan’s current status as a sort of “post-religious” society, misconceptions rule when it comes to the Japanese perception of Christian thought— all the yet while the country is ironically similar to Christian society itself. My conclusions further my arguments pertaining to iitoko dori, and how that even with Japan’s lack of Christian support, it still marks the post-Christian, based on religious engagement in the Japanese Christian quotidian.

Much of the Japanese perception of Christianity is xenophobic, or based on a societal happenstance toward a fear of “the Other.” According to much of Nobita-san’s in-depth research, the general perception of Christianity is still mixed, with most having at least a general knowledge of the religion in everyday Japanese life. This compelled my search to find the manner in which Christianity is at least “consciously” institutionalized in Japan, even in spite of its lack of popularity. To this end, I’ve concluded that after 500 years— as other nations in Asia

89 I do hope to be able to conduct my own study in Japan as soon as we are able to enter the country after COVID-19 protocol is lifted.
can be considered “conscious” observers of one non-Asian religion to another thereafter modernity—that Japan can be considered a Christian nation on account of the people who facilitate this global community in the country. Many native, non-Christian participants noted learning little of the religion, while also noting churches and colleges and other Christian institutions ran by Japanese Christians. This tells us researchers that Japan lives with Christianity, as the religion securely finds a home in this space.

Interestingly enough, with most Japanese, they will claim to be Buddhists and/or Shinto observers who in truth do not really take the time to “religiously” observe these traditions, as much as they are observing the “tradition to being Japanese” I suggested in the sections above—as well as Uchimura’s ontology “transcending” these cultural constraints via his universalist approach. I am not at all disregarding any fealty toward their respective belief systems. I am just noting a going trend in Nobita’s work that I feel other scholars we have pointed out have evoked as well. However, Christianity is still seen as a Western religion, which in turn, linked to fear of such incidents as the Sarin Gas attacks in 1997. At this time, the doomsday terrorist cult, Aleph (formerly, Aum Shinrikyo), released poisonous nerve agents in a Tokyo subway, as well as another attack in Matsumoto the previous year.

Much has been written on the matter, like the critically lauded *Ghost Written* (1999), a novel by David Mitchell marking prescient shifts in postmodern Asia.91 Participants stated that national media generally gave their viewers the impression that Aleph is a Christian-based belief system. From this, the perception of Christianity is something somewhat similar to our perception of the people of Islam in America as of September 2001. Whatever it may be, it is a completely politicized issue that forsakes the universal precepts toward a better humanity.

regardless of the chosen religion. And by doing so, the people, culture, and system by which Culture is facilitated by that people is forgotten; it leads to an erasure of culture for the sake of problematic traditions that only oppresses the minority.

In addition, one of Nobita’s interviewees—a Japanese Christian pastor of Jesus Community Kokubunji, Chizuo Sakurai—stated that many syncretic organizations that “try to rewrite the Bible” to fit their cultish narrative “sometimes come to others’ houses to proselytize, bothering the neighborhood folk.”92 And when it comes to government assistance, Nobita-san interviewed Lead Pastor of Japan Kingdom Church, Marcel Jonte, who discussed with Nobita how it is quite difficult for churches in Japan in our modern day. As a minister to Japanese Christians from the age of 13, he observes the sad irony in how the Japanese government on the one hand, allows for religious freedom—yet in fear of violating native traditions, typically refrains from, say, allowing churches to hold weekly Bible studies at community centers. I mention these religious leaders, as it is important to note the services they provide help shape these Japanese communities and our perspective on what is really happening in Japanese Christianity. Thus, we can garner an idea of what a post-Christian culture is like today—Nobita’s interviewees mirroring Shusaku’s postwar pains in our day and age. Ultimately, we are trying build an awareness of Christianity as a global culture, broadening our perspectives beyond our own belief systems, Christian or not.

All of this misguided fear lends to Christianity what these and other participants deemed a misperception held by Japan’s general public. This is especially true of Japanese Christians, who still have a hard time “coming out” as Christian, like one Yuki Sakita—taking up the mantle of the medieval concept of tatemae, or “polite fictions.” Japanese Christians are still

verily Japanese in light of evoking this medieval Japanese concept— as well as having to “save face,” a concept from ancient Chinese transcultural transmissions of Confucianism to and from Japan. They felt the need to do this in order to, again, maintain the sense of *wa* (harmony), as one Japanese Christian participant in Nobita’s study commiserated.

Therefore, for how Japan is a freely religious country, the “absolute of the unwritten” is still pervasive in Japanese Christian local communities and is without real government support, with participants evoking the same identity crises Shusaku relied on Christ to escape. They still live with a demographic fissure, their identities split between “basic shinto” and Christianity. And as in spite of this seemingly impossible circumstance, some of Nobita-san’s missionary participants, like a Jeff Linscott, in this light, honored Uchimura Kanzo.93 They eternally laude what he had done for Japanese Christianity in the world of Shinto and Buddhism, bridging the gap between what is essential to *being* Japanese, and devoutly *following* Christ. But in this way, these identities are truly what it means to be post-Christian, in that they live with particular problems that pertain to their tethered, Japanese, postmodern-Christian experience. Thus to this end, their struggle marks the contemporary effects Westernization had on Christianizing the Asian world — through the end of WWII and up until today.

**Final Thought**94

So, acquiring all this, how does one think on a popular world religion breaching far-off shores, carrying good news to what might as well be a different universe? As if to say something of Christ in humanity, from the Jesuits work— to Uchimura Kanzo and Tanabe Hajime— to

93 *Nobita from Japan,* “Being Christian in Japan, 2020.” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW1Hn8DxZ9s&time=26s.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW1Hn8DxZ9s&time=26s.)

tethering Shusaku Endo back together, the Christian faith has most definitely reached the Japanese mind. What this has both blessed and wrought is a persistent struggle within the contemporary Japanese identity, so seen in so many other facets of Japanese culture.\(^95\) This struggle is starkly presented in identities living through a global pandemic. They are currently finding ways to whether yesterday’s social stigma beset by the perils of tradition, as seen in Nobita-san’s research.

So why is all this important? Because God cannot be placed in one place; meaning God cannot be solely based in one hegemony or privileged place of presupposed predominance over all that is heavenly in humanity and beyond. When we superimpose our ideologies on others, there are social consequences— consequences like the man or woman or other human being who must contend with oneness with God or people beyond or outside Christian cosmology. Thus, this is a post-Christianity, because again, this is an effect of the modern, when considering the promulgation of contemporary religion in the non-Christian world from the Meiji through WW II and up until today. This not merely an open critique, but more so a call-to-action, an invocation to reaching those with complicated, globalized identities in our communities, both large and small—at home and abroad. Thus, post-Christianity is an awareness that ought to wake us up out of our sleep—where we dream of some misperceived semblance of the traditional that only oppresses God’s true people— humanity itself.

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People were not wrong: graduate school was very difficult. One of the things the college constantly reminded us about, however, was to be grateful for the opportunity to study in such a grand place, learning equally grand things from such genuinely great people. The fruits of their service and labor prepared us for the goodness that’s yet to come, now that we’ve completed this step in our journey. I would like to thank the Lord our Father, for always giving me the strength to continue; and my family, for their ever loving support. They intimately know how great this moment in our lives has become, here in 2021. I would like to give so much praise and thanks to my professors, teachers, mentors, counselors, and guides for really teaching me how to lean in to my support structure. I would like to thank my cohort for helping me to become the scholar I set out to be. I hope we all fare well on our individual journeys. Thank you all for helping me to achieve this feat in my life as an academic. My utter love and gratitude for you all will stay with me, always. Any and all mistakes are my own!

With much thanks,

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