

The Passion of Christianity:
the Japanese interpretation of the status of Christianity in Japan through the use of anime

University of Oulu

History

History of Science and Ideas, undergraduate thesis

25.5.2016

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
1 SENGOKU PERIOD: THE AGE OF WAR.....	4
1.1 Ships filled with missionaries and firearms.....	4
1.2 Demon King Nobunaga and the invisible Christianity.....	5
2 TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE: THE AGE OF ISOLATION.....	8
2.1 Period of peace and persecution.....	8
2.2 Heaven's messenger Amakusa Shiro and the rebellious Christianity.....	9
3 POST-WAR PERIOD: THE AGE OF EQUALITY.....	14
3.1 Modern Christian.....	14
3.2 Everyman believer and the content Christianity.....	15
CONCLUSION.....	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	19

INTRODUCTION

Japan has had a tumultuous history with Christianity. From the day Christianity arrived to the shores of Japan, there have been constant cultural, religious and political clashes with the indigenous culture. Only after the end of World War II has the situation been somewhat resolved, with the freedom of religion being incorporated into the Japanese law. Nowadays Christianity has established itself as just another religion in the country, with about one percent of Japanese people (1 908 000 people) identifying themselves as Christians. But religion, or the sense of belonging to a religion, has a different meaning to the Japanese, due to the way they have incorporated foreign religions to their culture. The indigenous belief system, Shinto, has its basis on animistic belief that everything in nature is divine, and subsequently everything in nature has its own spirits or gods, called *kami*. After a while, Japan began to pick up religious influences from outside, beginning with the introduction of Confucian ethics and Taoist dualism in the 5th century and continuing with the more important introduction of Buddhism from China and Korea in the 6th century. At this stage of its existence, Japan freely mix-and-matched religious ideas, more out of political and social needs than spiritual. Japanese were eager to form relationships with other neighboring kingdoms so that it could gain beneficial alliances with them. The multitudes of imported ideas from these foreign religions included art, sciences, agricultural and engineering techniques. From this complete diffusion of religious ideas into every aspect of life, it is not weird to think that the Japanese had no religion at all when later Christians would ask them of their religious life. To a Japanese, religion was the entirety of life, so why make any differentiations?¹

The Japanese seem to view Christianity, and any religion really, along the lines of rituals and events, not belief. Japanese celebrate a few Christian holidays such as Christmas and Valentine's Day (although they are not considered national holidays), but they are secular, commerce-oriented events where the spirit of the original festival has been supplanted by the marketing of decorations and gifts.² Christian weddings especially have proven to be popular, to the detriment of the traditional Shinto-style wedding ceremonies. These ceremonies are also less about the Christian belief system, and more about the pretty aesthetic quality and the relatively low cost of the ceremony. Christian weddings have so

1 Bunce 1955, 1-5.

2 "Christianity", japan-guide.com, electr. document.

little to do with actual Christianity, that in most cases the priest is just a hired foreigner, instead of a trained man of faith.³ So Christianity has taken its place in a secularized Japan. Its influence can be seen throughout Japan, but only superficially. Because of this, Japanese people are aware of Christianity and can recognise many of its visual elements, such as churches, imagery pertaining to Jesus Christ, angels and demons. But they don't seem to care about the underlying belief systems, which leads into mistakes, deliberate or accidental, and strange interpretations when using Christian elements in their cultural works. The way these elements are used then can be seen as a representation of the mindsets of Japanese people in regards to their relations with Christianity.

In this study I will be researching Japanese popular culture in order to find out how it views the status of Christianity throughout their history. I will be concentrating on anime, Japanese animated television series and movies, because of two reasons. In addition to original content, the anime industry produces a staggering amount of adaptations from all other mediums of popular culture, such as comics, literature and videogames⁴, making anime a splendid cross section of Japanese popular culture. The other reason is, that for a Western researcher, there are more translated materials and prior research into anime available than for other mediums. Especially ADAM BARKMAN's paper *Anime, Manga and Christianity: A Comprehensive Analysis* originally had helped spark my research, seemingly being the only other research paper that has been done with this particular subject. Differing from my work, Barkman focuses solely on the Christian perspective, whether Christianity as presented in anime is heretical or can a Christian person derive any value from watching these types of anime. Moreover, most of the anime that he is studying fall more on the scale utterly fantastical, having little to no resemblance in real history.

I will be using the methodology MARC FERRO presented in the book *The Historian and Film*, in the article *The fiction film and historical analysis*. Ferro introduced four procedures that could be used in analyzing fiction films: examining the reception of the film, the work itself, the relations between the authors and society, or examining the history of a film after it was first released.⁵ For the purposes of this research, I will be using only the second and third procedures due to the lack of easily obtainable translated

3 *Taipei Times* (TT) 7.9.2005.

4 For example, the anime season of Autumn 2015, lasting from September to December, had as new anime, 36 comic adaptations, 5 game adaptations, 17 novel adaptations and 1 live-action TV adaptation.

5 Smith & Ferro et al 1976, 83.

materials concerning Japanese receptions to anime. As for the last procedure, it would only be useful in noting Western censorism of Christian elements from anime during the localization process. But because this study focuses on the Japanese interpretation, we will not concern ourselves with editing done in the West.

The primary problem with this research is the need to rely only on translated materials, which comprise only a small part of all the anime in Japan, especially with older anime. This skews the research somewhat by adjusting the time period of the studied anime more towards the modern day. Other problems arise from concerns regarding the suitability of anime even being used in this way as a serious historical analysis, to determine the viewpoints of people regarding a specific point of their own past. Anime also tends to use very fantastical plots with supernatural elements, sometimes in settings not even remotely close to the real world, so there needs to be careful analysis about allegories and symbolism to find out if there even are any parallels to reality to be found. It is also very important to note that for every anime with elements of Christianity, there are dozens more that are without them. We should not overestimate the importance of Christian elements in anime, for they are in the end just a drop in the ocean of Japanese popular culture themes.

The research will be structured chronologically. Chapter 1 will deal with the time period spanning from 1549, when Christianity first arrived to Japan, to 1614, when Christianity was banned from the country. Chapter 2 will focus on the Tokugawa Shogunate⁶, the last feudal military government in Japan, and the almost 300 years persecution that practising Christians had to suffer under, ending on the reopening of Japan in 1853. And finally Chapter 3 will take us to the modern era. This period of time will be open-ended by nature, since anime set in modern times can be rather vague about the exact date that it is set in. There is a gap in the time periods covered, because Christianity didn't have as much of an influence on Japan during the Meiji Restoration and pre-war Japan, at least not enough to be depicted as an important element in popular culture concerning these eras. Each of these chapters will have several anime series or movies dedicated to those time periods, made between 1985 and 2012, although in case of adaptations, the original work will be at the very least several years older than the adaptation. The chapters are split into two subchapters, with the first focusing on the historical background of the period, and the second dealing with the anime depicting those periods.

⁶ The effective rulers of Japan were military dictators, shoguns, belonging to the Tokugawa clan.

1. SENGOKU PERIOD: THE AGE OF WAR

1.1 Ships filled with missionaries and firearms

Christianity arrived to the shores of Japan in 1549, in the middle of the nation-wide civil war known as the Sengoku-period.⁷ The first missionaries were Catholic Jesuits from Portugal, who were convinced that the Japanese would make fine Christians, mostly due to misunderstandings about their religion. ⁸Christians were tolerated by the Japanese for two reasons: due to another misunderstanding, they were at first thought to be Buddhist sect, and because they brought trade goods, especially firearms to use against rival lords, from the West.⁹ Missionaries sought converts in both the lower and the high classes of society. Commoners could be converted easily through charity and medical care.¹⁰ The lords didn't much care about the tenets of this strange new religion, but they were still important for the missionaries, because the lords could convert their entire dominions into Christianity with a simple command. Although, lords were known to withdraw their support of Christianity if the trade ships stopped coming.¹¹ Christianity found a powerful ally in Japan. One of the potential unifiers of Japan, the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534 – 1582) supported Christian missionaries, because he wanted access to Western technology and commerce,¹² but also because he didn't like the powerful position of Buddhism in Japan.¹³ In 1568 Nobunaga entered Kyoto, the center of the Imperial government, and started consolidating power militarily, economically and politically.¹⁴ Nobunaga clearly wanted to make drastic changes to the Japan that he was intent on conquering. He went after the Buddhist monks of the powerful *Ikkō*, Pure Land and Lotus sects, envisioning a more secular, national hegemony¹⁵. But his ambitions were never realized, because he was murdered by his vassal Akechi Mitsuhide, because of Nobunaga's desire to reform the noble samurai warrior class from feudal lords, with their own domains, into mere retainers who relied on the economical support of their liege lord.¹⁶

7 Bunce 1955, 5.

8 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 307-308.

9 Bunce 1955, 148.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 "Japan's Christian Century (1550-1650)", electr. document.

13 Bunce 1955, 149.

14 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 41-42.

15 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 43-44.

16 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 45.

At the time of Nobunaga's death, Protestant Christian organizations had started appearing in Japan, trying to discredit the Catholic Jesuits and promoting their own faith. Nobunaga's successor as a conqueror of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536 – 1598) saw the religious bickering as a precursor to European political maneuvering which could rip the newly-unified Japan apart.¹⁷ Hideyoshi and his eventual successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu began a campaign to remove any Christian influence in Japan, resulting in the edict of 1614, which in essence, made it illegal to be a Christian and/or try to convert people to Christianity¹⁸ Until Commodore Perry forcibly reopened the borders of Japan, nearly 300 years later, the Christian converts of Japan had to stay hidden from governmental purges and loyalty tests, becoming the *kakure kirishitan* or "hidden Christians" of Japan.¹⁹

1.2 Demon King Nobunaga and the invisible Christianity

Oda Nobunaga himself is a popular character in Japanese popular culture, appearing in numerous anime series. But he appears to have garnered quite a reputation for himself, due to his attempts at reformation, as previously stated. Nobunaga usually is depicted as a villainous character, and in works with supernatural elements he might be even be demonic in power and appearance. These stem from his notorious ruthlessness.²⁰ Incidentally, this common portrayal means that it is rare to find Nobunaga's Western sympathies represented in popular culture, let alone his association with Christianity. The 2014 anime *Nobunaga the Fool* is set on a fantastical alternate universe, where war is fought not only with medieval infantry, but also with giant robots. Oda Nobunaga is here helped by several Western characters, most noticeably the apparent reincarnations of Leonardo da Vinci and Jeanne d'Arc. The Christian element comes into play through Jeanne who, much like the real one, sees visions from God, prophesying of a Savior King and his opposer the Destroyer King. Based on these visions, she is resolved to protect Nobunaga from all harm. This is however the extent that the show goes with Christian themes. Later on in the series, the Western mythology aspects focus more on the Arthurian, with the Round Table and the Holy Grail becoming critical plot points. Characters on the Eastern Planet, the setting's Japan-equivalent, rarely interact with Jeanne concerning her faith, making her visions and

17 Bunce 1955, 149.

18 Bunce 1955, 150.

19 Brooke, "Ikitsuki Journal; Once Banned, Christianity Withers in an Old Stronghold" (art). *The New York Times* 12.25.2003.

20 *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol 4, 44.

faith more like plot elements to get this character to be with Nobunaga. The visions are not even used to foreshadow things to come, that role is fulfilled by Leonardo's usage of the tarot deck to predict events. Through Nobunaga's and the Oda clan's singular association with these Western characters, it is established that the historical Nobunaga was also considered by the creators of the anime to be influenced by the Western world, even if they added the element of Christianity only as a slight nod to the historical Jeanne d'Arc. If we look at the original creator of *Nobunaga the Fool*, Kawamori Shōji (1960 –), we see that he is an industry veteran, having started his work in the 1970's, and along the way created many classic anime series such as *Macross*, a classic sci-fi anime franchise with many derivatives and imitators.²¹ At the time of his upbringing, in the 1960's and early 1970's, Japan was in the middle of its economic boom, while culturally the country had turned towards itself: the general viewpoint changed from universal worldliness to emphasize Japan's uniqueness²². This could explain why Kawamori left much of Christianity out of *Nobunaga the Fool*. Another interpretation could be that in depicting an alternate Nobunaga, he wanted more to focus on the character, and not on his supporters. Or it could be just that Kawamori is more interested in depicting giant robots than faith, considering his impressive portfolio as a mechanical designer in other anime series.

Other anime series do not show Nobunaga with Christianity in any way, but might implicitly portray him as a friend of the West by associating him with firearms, such as in *Sengoku Basara: Samurai Kings* and *Nobunagun*. *Sengoku Basara* shows Nobunaga using both a traditional Japanese sword, and a Western-made firearm, indicating a synthesis of Western and Eastern cultures, while *Nobunagun* has the spirit of Nobunaga trapped inside a gun, which the main character of the series uses to fight. But even in these, the origins of Nobunaga's firearm usage are never stated, possibly downplaying the influence of the West on Nobunaga. But then, if we move our viewpoint out of Nobunaga and into the rest of the Sengoku-period, Christianity is still nowhere to be found in anime depicting this era. This can be reasonably explained with the geographical position of Christianity during Sengoku-period. Christian missionaries mainly landed and stayed in Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's main islands²³. Kyushu was remote enough from the capital in Kyoto that the main conflicts of the era didn't reach it, and it was finally conquered by

21 Kawamori, Shoji, MyAnimeList, electr. document.

22 *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol 6, 773.

23 *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol 4, 321.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi, uniting Kyushu to the mainland, as late as 1587.²⁴ When put into this kind of light, it is no wonder that Christianity would be passed over by anime studios wanting to capture the feeling of the chaotic but glorious Sengoku-period.

²⁴ *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol 4, 304.

2. TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE: THE AGE OF ISOLATION

2.1 Period of peace and persecution

As stated on the previous chapter, Christianity had to go underground following the edict of 1614. Officially Hideyoshi argued in his edict that the Christians were forcibly converting whole populations and eradicating native culture by destroying Shinto shrines and relics.²⁵ But even going after Christianity, Hideyoshi did not want the prosperous trade with Europeans to end, which was problematic considering the Jesuits actually owned the port city of Nagasaki. It was decided to expel the Jesuits from the city and put Nagasaki under the Shogunate.²⁶ Trade continued in Nagasaki, but it was restricted to only the Protestant Dutch, who cared more for profit than the salvation of Japanese souls.²⁷ Missionaries were banished, and lords converted to Christianity either were made to renounce their foreign religion or their lands were taken from them.²⁸ The Tokugawa Shogunate enforced their edicts with a system rooted in Buddhism: everyone needed to register their religious affiliation in a Buddhist temple, and this registration was also a prerequisite if you wanted to enter any kind of service and in some places such as Osaka, to even buy land.²⁹

Isolated from actual clergy and holy texts, the brand of Christianity that the *kakure kirishitan* followed saw many Japanese ideas taken into their belief, making their religion a strange blend of Christianity, Shinto and Buddhism.³⁰ The need to stay hidden obviously hampered the *kakure kirishitan*'s contributions to Japanese culture. But the mere concept of Christian groups still in hiding, maybe plotting something nefarious such as outright rebellion, did influence Japan. As stated, there were purges and persecution performed by the government against suspected Christians. But this wasn't just rampant paranoia, because the Christians actually did rise up in a rebellion in 1637, on the island of Amakusa and in the Shimabara Peninsula.³¹ The Tokugawa Shogunate responded rapidly by sending armed forces to the area, but the rebellion lasted until 1638, when over 30 000 Christian

25 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 360.

26 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 363.

27 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 369.

28 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 362.

29 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 371.

30 *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol 4*, 370.

31 Bunce 1955, 150.

converts had been killed.³²The Shimabara rebellion was partly made possible by the unifying force of Amakusa Shiro Tokisada, a 16-year old Christian who took control as the leader of the rebellion.³³ Since then, Amakusa Shiro has been a common sight in popular culture focusing on the time period of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

2.2 Heaven's messenger Amakusa Shiro and the rebellious Christianity

Whereas anime set in the Sengoku-period obviously like to concentrate on the warfare of the civil wars, the relatively peaceful Tokugawa Shogunate seems to inspire anime which focus more on adventuring and conflict on the personal scale. From here on, firearms no longer signify Western sympathies and instead they become a sign of modernity along with Western clothing, while the old-fashioned samurai still cling to their traditional swords. Without war, the numerous samurai warriors did not have anyone to fight. This loss of purpose and the attempts to fill it with something, whether that be writing poetry or dueling your fellow samurai, are common themes in anime depicting this era. It is not rare to see Christian characters in these types of anime, which typically have the characters travel around Japan searching for something. But this also means that the Christians are not usually a mainstay of the series, instead maybe showing up for one story arc.

This kind of approach is used for example in *Blade of the Immortal* (anime 2008, original work 1993), which is about the immortal samurai Manji who needs to kill 1000 evil men in order to finally die. Christianity makes a minor appearance at the very beginning of the series. Manji is confessing his sins to a Christian priest, who then proceeds to attack Manji with a gun that has the latin word *divina* inscribed on it. This priest is depicted wholly negatively. His appearance is crooked and his eyes dart around in an inhuman way, independently of each other. After seemingly killing Manji, he lets out a mad laugh, before being killed by the regenerated Manji. His motive for killing Manji appears to be to become the strongest man in Japan, a motivation unbecoming for a priest, and he is the brother of a bandit leader. After Manji has returned home from this event, an old Buddhist nun that gave Manji his immortality further puts down Christianity by asking: "And why do you seek a foreign country's god to redeem your sins?". Manji avoids the question, but states a while later in the conversation that: "To think, when a samurai redeems his sins, it

³² Ibid.

³³ "Amakusa: Land of Living Faith" Amakusa Treasure Island Tourism Association, electr. document.

means to slit his stomach.”, enforcing the futility of Christianity in solving a samurai's spiritual need. The original creator of *Blade of the Immortal*, Samura Hiroaki (1970 –) is an avid listener of Western music and has a classical art education³⁴, which imply that he would be knowledgeable about at least the basics of Western culture, including Christianity. Yet he chose to show a mad Christian killer priest as the first character that his main character Manji kills. Samura is using Christianity here to show the audience the dark themes of his work. Before shooting Manji, the priest exclaims astonishment over the fact that he had killed 100 men and proclaims: ”Even the kindest god might not forgive you.”, fully cementing *Blade of the Immortal* from the very beginning as a cynical anime series. For a more balanced view of Christianity under the Tokugawa Shogunate, we will be looking at the 2004 anime *Samurai Champloo*. The director of the series, Watanabe Shinichiro (1965 –) is famous for mixing up different genres and elements from both the West and the East in his works, such as in his previous work *Cowboy Bebop*, a sci-fi film noir western with Jazz music.³⁵ In *Samurai Champloo* this style manifests as several deliberate anachronisms, usually modern Western culture superimposed on top of the old Japanese setting, beginning with the strong influence of hip-hop music and culture in the show (such as one main character's, the reckless swordsman Mugen's traditional clothing is worn in a way reminiscent of hip-hop artists and his fighting incorporates breakdance moves) and its soundtrack. In fact, there is an entire website devoted only to cataloguing anachronisms in the series.³⁶ So it is reasonable to assume that Watanabe knows about Western culture when he is showing Christianity in *Samurai Champloo*. Christianity plays a rather big part in the backstory of the series. Fuu, the female main character is revealed to be a Japanese Christian, and the man she has been searching for the whole series turns out to be her father, who is described to have been an important Christian samurai participating in the Shimabara rebellion. Fuu's father is portrayed in a sympathetic light, even though he abandoned his family and betrayed the Shogunate, because he did all these to protect his family from anti-Christian persecution. Christianity and the Shimabara rebellion is depicted in a good light here, they were just people who wanted to be left alone to practise their faith. Same kind of portrayal is shown in *Unholy Union*, episode 19 of the series, which deals with the *kakure kirishitan*. In the episode, a village of naive hidden Christians is fooled to produce guns for sale by a greedy Japanese man disguised as the grandson of Francisco Xavier, the first Jesuit missionary in Japan. This man does not care about

34 Samura, Hiroaki, MyAnimeList, electr. document.

35 Watanabe, Shinichiro, MyAnimeList, electr. document.

36 *The Complete Guide to Anachronisms in Samurai Champloo*, electr. document.

religion and is awed by how easy it is to make the Christians believe anything he says. This seems to be a critical stance against Christianity. But it is shown that the villagers aren't exactly naive, just desperate for salvation after years of persecution. The villagers are also portrayed to be good folk, if too easily led astray, in helping Fuu to find her father. From these elements we can say that the influence of Western culture on Watanabe has most likely colored his perceptions of Christianity positively.

Now that we finally arrive at the depictions of Amakusa Shiro, we find that they are decidedly less positive. One reason for these negative portrayals is that with the Shimabara rebellion being the only major uprising of the Tokugawa Shogunate, it can be seen as a major disruption of peace and bringing back war to a land that has finally been rid of it. First we handle *Ninja Resurrection* (anime 1997, original work 1964), which features Amakusa Shiro as the prophesied *tenshi*³⁷ who will save the people of Japan. The prophecy also states Shiro will instead return as Satan if he is not allowed to become Christ, drawing parallels to the common theological idea about an evil anti-Christ, although these are rarely combined into a single person. In *Ninja Resurrection* the overall narrative of the Shimabara rebellion stays the same, the divergence from actual historical events begins when a group of ninjas assassinate Amakusa Shiro. Here, Shiro has the capability to perform actual miracles, many of which are Christian in nature (such as the conjuring of supernatural fire which form into cross-shaped patterns), but some have no basis in Christianity: chief examples being violent telekinesis to throw objects and the transformation into a massive Eastern-style dragon. Although the latter could be considered to be foreshadowing later events, since in the Bible's Book of Revelation, Satan is called a dragon.³⁸

It is notable that Amakusa Shiro is the primary antagonist of *Ninja Resurrection*, opposed by the Tokugawa and the main character, the famous samurai Yagyu Jubei. Christianity is represented as dualistic and changing in nature, capable of protecting innocents and committing incredible travesties at the same time. No distinction is made in the story between Christ and Satan, good and evil, with the former seamlessly becoming the latter. At first, the young Amakusa Shiro is shown to be an idealistic leader, but he is slowly being drawn into evil by his advisor Mori Souiken. And after his death, Shiro is reborn as Satan, ready to wreak havoc upon the world. Shiro's reborn is symbolised with the

37 The word means "angel", but it is used here to refer to Shiro as the child of God, or the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

38 Revelation. 20:2.

transformation of a crucifix into the Virgin Mary and then to the Devil. The only supernatural elements of *Ninja Resurrection* come from Christian sources, frightening the common Japanese with exotic and alien Christian sorcery. Shiro laughs maniacally as he receives a blessing from his "Father" and uses this power for revenge, a theme that the Bible vehemently denies³⁹. These show that *Ninja Resurrection* shows Christianity in a very negative, even demonic, light overall, although it acknowledges the wrongful persecution of Christians and all the good that devout Christians can do, even if later they end up warping into satanism. Futaro Yamada (1922 – 2001), the writer of the original novel that *Ninja Resurrection* is based on, has written many stories adapting classic Japanese tales and myths, being very familiar with the original stories⁴⁰. Having lived through World War II, it would be plausible to think that Yamada would have a rather negative opinion of the West, Christianity included, coloring his interpretation of the rebellion.

Our next showcase will be *Rurouni Kenshin* (anime 1996, original work 1994). *Rurouni Kenshin* follows the adventures of the former assassin Himura Kenshin in the Meiji period of Japan, who seeks atonement for his past violent life by helping those in need. The series doesn't actually happen during the Tokugawa Shogunate, but during the following Meiji restoration, in 1878. This was a time when Christianity had re-emerged in Japan, but it was still not tolerated in any way, it was outright oppressed.⁴¹ *Rurouni Kenshin* is still covered here, because of the sole Christian element it has. In one story arc⁴² Kenshin clashes with the swordsman Amakusa Shougo, who is intended to be an obvious reference to Amakusa Shiro. He is even called the second coming of Amakusa Shiro. Sadly, due to lack of translated materials, we cannot analyze the creators of *Rurouni Kenshin* like we have done with the others. However, it is important to note the story arc in question doesn't appear in the original comic book, it is exclusive to the anime adaptation. Moreover, the story arc involving Amakusa Shougo is the first big story arc in the anime after it changed animation studios (although the same man, Furuhashi Kazuhiro stayed as the overall director of the series) and after it started making content separate from the original work.⁴³ For future research, it would be interesting to see if the change in animation studio actually

39 Matthew. 5:39.

40 Futaro Yamada, Books from Japan, electr. document.

41 Bunce 1955, 152.

42 Episodes 67-76. *Rurouni Kenshin*.

43 *Rurouni Kenshin: Meiji Kenkaku Romantan*, MyAnimeList, electr. document.

affected the content produced in any meaningful way.

Rurouni Kenshin as well refers to Amakusa as a Messiah, the Son of God, and attributes a prophecy to his return. Unlike *Ninja Resurrection*, these are confirmed to be just delusions of Shougo. Amakusa Shougo is also concerned with revenge, just as *Ninja Resurrection's* Amakusa Shiro. However in *Rurouni Kenshin*, revenge is clearly established to be wrong in Christianity, but Shougo just doesn't care about this and wants to avenge the Shimabara rebellion, while also creating a "land of God" in Shimabara. He intends to do this by sparking another Shimabara rebellion which he intends to win with the use of his powers. This Amakusa also possesses supernatural powers, but differing from his other incarnation, Shougo's powers come, not from Christian sorcery or God, but from the same type of supernatural Japanese swordplay, *Hiten Mitsurugi ryu*, as Kenshin's powers. Alongside those, he also performs miracles, such as "killing the daylight" by causing an eclipse of the sun or healing numerous people. These miracles are not supernatural in nature, but come from Amakusa Shougo's advanced understanding of European sciences such as medicine.

It is important to notice one thing from the portrayals of Christianity and Amakusa Shiro in these anime. Both Amakusas are initially good-natured and righteous protectors of oppressed Christians, but fall into evil by the means of revenge and hate, concepts that are evil in Christianity. Amakusa Shougo manages to redeem himself in the end, after Kenshin defeats him and Shougo recognises the evil he has done. Meanwhile, the common Christian folk are portrayed very sympathetically and their faith is not demonized in any way. Their belief is shown to be pure and innocent, and the Tokugawa and Meiji governments are undeniably shown to be wrong in persecuting Christianity as a whole. In *Rurouni Kenshin*, at the end of the story arc, the government exiles the entire Christian community in Shimabara, including Amakusa Shougo, to Holland. In a way, these two anime show support of Christianity and criticism of the government in those periods, but try to justify the Christian purges by making both Amakusas huge threats to the safety of Japan as a whole, wielding supernatural might.

3. POST-WAR PERIOD: THE AGE OF EQUALITY

3.1 Modern Christian

After the reopening of the country by Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854, Japan was forced to acknowledge Christianity, introducing more difficulties to the plan to establish Shinto as the sole religion, a national cult to revere the emperor as the descendant of the Sun Goddess.⁴⁴ Later during the lead-up to World War II, Christianity suffered another setback in the form of nationalistic Japanese people's growing anti-West sentiments. The growing militarization of the 1930s meant also that more authority was given to Shinto, in an effort to promote militarism in the name of the emperor. Most famously, dead soldiers were venerated in Shinto shrines and seen as role models of a true Japanese. To protect the unifying effect of Shinto, legalization was put into effect that made opposing the teachings of Shinto punishable with death at its worst.⁴⁵ However, slowly but surely, through charity and education, Christianity crept back into Japan as an acknowledged religion.⁴⁶ Kyushu was still the main center of Christianity in Japan, having had the greatest amount of missionaries in that area before the Tokugawa Shogunate, meaning that it had largest populations of *kakure kirishitan* during the persecutions of the Shogunate.⁴⁷

After the war, religious belief in Japan changed sharply over the decades. In the 1970s and 1980s reports indicated that most Japanese belonged to several different religions, but by the start of the 1990s this had rapidly declined to a point where over 70 percent claimed not to believe in any religion. This decrease in belief, combined with the traditional Japanese communalistic society, resulted in resentment and outright fear of those with strong, personal beliefs.⁴⁸ In a culture where everyone is expected to conform to the rules of society, those who decline to participate in Shinto or Buddhist rituals are seen as rebelling against their upbringing, culture and society.⁴⁹

44 Bunce 1955, 29.

45 O'Brien&Ōgoshi 1996, 44.

46 Bunce 1955, 152-153.

47 "Christianity", japan-guide.com, electr. document.

48 O'Brien&Ōgoshi 1996, 21.

49 O'Brien&Ōgoshi 1996, 22.

3.2 Everyman believer and the content Christianity

Anime set in the modern era Japan tend to have their Christianity more grounded in realism. A character's Christianity might be treated as a simple character quirk that sets them apart from the rest, but it doesn't impact the plot in any meaningful way. If Christianity is in a prominent position, its purpose is usually to emphasize the differences between characters, where some might be a bit distrustful of others depending on their religion: Christian characters find it hard to explain their behaviour and beliefs to a society that has been ostracizing them for so long, and non-Christians are innately little fearful of those not conforming to their societal standards, as we've seen previously.

In the slice-of-life anime series *Sakamichi no Apollon* (anime 2012, original work 2007), which is set in Kyushu during 1966, two of the main characters are Japanese Christians. This fact doesn't factor into the main story of the series, which is about high school drama and playing jazz-music with your friends, in any way. These Christian characters are shown going to the church on Sundays and praying, and no attention is directed to their faith, to even show them as weird or alien. Religion is completely in the background. Early on, the only function Christianity seems to have in the series is to bring more drama to the series' love triangle, because the third, non-Christian main character gets jealous of the two Christians' faith bringing them closer to each other. But later, Christian main character Sentarō is revealed to be the son of an American soldier with his faith coming from his father. Sentarō's bullying nature stems from the resentment he received from his birth, making his Christianity an important part of the character's background. And as for the creator of *Sakamichi no Apollon*, Kodama Yuki, she was born in the Nagasaki prefecture of Japan, which is located in Kyushu⁵⁰. This is the same prefecture that had the only foreign presence in Japan during the Tokugawa Shogunate, while being on the same island that still hosts the majority of Japanese Christians. It is no wonder that Kodama would be comfortable showing ordinary Christians in her work. Another example of Christianity being relegated to a background element can be seen in many anime series which focuses on the relationship drama of students in Catholic all-girls high schools, such as *Maria-sama ga miteru* (anime 2004, original work 1997). In these instances, the function of Christianity and the school being Catholic seems to be as a plot device to separate the female main characters from any male contact, usually in order for the characters to

⁵⁰ Kodama, Yuki, MyAnimeList, electr. document

eventually develop romantic feelings towards each other. Most of the time it's not even certain how many of the characters actually are Christian themselves, considering that Catholic schools are not actually allowed to discriminate possible students by their religious affiliation.

Christianity is certainly not in the background in the sport/romantic comedy anime *One-pound Gospel* (anime 1988, original work 1987), which shows the growing relationship between Hatanaka Kosaku, a struggling boxer, and Sister Angela, a nun-in-training. Aside from boxing, the main conflict of the story is Sister Angela trying to cope with the conflict between her duties as a nun and her developing feelings towards Kosaku. Nuns are supposed to be celibate, but because Sister Angela is just a novice, she hasn't yet taken her vows. She still wants to become a fully-fledged nun and knows that if she reciprocates Kosaku's feelings, she will have to leave the church. Apart from a few, minor mistakes (novice nuns are not allowed to wear the habit of the nuns, nuns of any kind are not allowed to take confessions from people), *One-pound Gospel* handles Christianity well. The major "mistake" of depicting a relationship involving a nun is handled in-story as well as something that nuns shouldn't do, making the relationship aspect of the anime a story about forbidden love, a usual trope in romance. The existence of a major Christian presence in Kosaku's hometown is also justified, because it is shown that the church also takes care of little children in their own kindergarten. This is a realistic portrayal, because Christianity in modern Japan was established with social welfare work to make Christianity more acceptable to Japanese people.⁵¹ These depictions can be explained quite easily. Takahashi Rumiko (1957 –), who created *One-pound Gospel*, once said in an 1985 interview that while she herself doesn't believe in God, her ancestors did, who were most likely *kakure kirishitan*.⁵² In finding out her family history, she must have stumbled into how the basic tenets of Christianity work.

51 Bunce 1955, 156.

52 "100 Questions", *Shonen Sunday Graphic Urusei Yatsura Volume 14*.

CONCLUSION

Christianity has played many roles in the history of Japan. From bringers of military power in the form of firearms to foreign devils plotting to invade Japan. From hidden villagers to rebellious zealots. From ostracized sons of foreign soldiers to breachers of societal norms. With all these different roles, is it a wonder if the Japanese have many wildly differing interpretations about Christianity's involvement in Japan's history? These interpretations vary depending on the era depicted.

For Sengoku-era, the role of Christianity has been downplayed when compared to the viewpoint that Western scholars have of this period. Oda Nobunaga is shown either prevailing through his own ruthlessness, or the fact that he has Christians and/or the firearms they bring on his side is just to mark him as special. So special even that he attracts foreigners from far away who are willing to devote their lives for him. Christianity without Nobunaga is glossed over entirely, the slow transformation of Kyushu into Christian territory not deemed exciting enough to show in the war-torn Sengoku-era.

For the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate, there are two types of interpretations, whether the authors have wanted to focus on the desperate and defenceless *kakure kirishitan*, or the rebellious Amakusa Shiro and his Shimabara rebellion. For the *kakure kirishitan*, the overall feeling for them is completely sympathetic to their plight. There is some apologetic sentiment involved when we see the main characters fight against the persecuting Japanese government in order to protect the helpless Christians. On the other hand, anime truly shows the *kakure kirishitan* as helpless and easily fooled by con artists, who need the help of the culturally Japanese main characters in order to survive. In looking at Amakusa Shiro, it seems that the anime creators are thinking that the only way for the Christians to gain power, is to become that which the government had labeled them: rebellious zealots.

For the post-war period, Christianity has finally assumed a relative state of normalcy, where the Christian adherents can step out of the shadows and intermingle with the rest of the population without overt fear of violence or open discrimination. But especially in the next few decades following the war, Christianity would also be related to the American occupiers with fierce reputation. But by the late 1980s Christians became just another part of the population, but with their own rituals and customs, that would mark them as not

really belonging the dominant culture.

It is clear that in period anime, Christianity has taken the role of an outsider, even if the presented Christians happen to be natural-born Japanese. When introduced to the relatively homogenous Japan and its culture, clashes are sure to occur. In anime, if the government is evil, then it opposes the good Christians and vice versa. Anime does not present a clear way for Christianity to coexist peacefully with Japan and integrate into its culture. The closest you can get is by keeping your religion invisible and conforming to the native culture, as *Sakamichi no Apollon* demonstrated. Culture is shaped by beliefs, and culture in turn also shapes those beliefs. Just watching anime like these don't make one hate Christianity, but growing up seeing Christianity presented in one way will influence future artists and writers to also present Christianity in their own works in a similar way.

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