

On the perception of Christian martyrdom

in Japan: (1597-1639)

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In 1597, six Franciscans, three Jesuits and seventy lay people were martyred in Nagasaki. This episode initiated a series of martyrdoms of Christians on the Japanese islands taking place until 1639. An estimated group of 150,000 Christians went underground, forming the communities of Kakure Kirishitans (Hidden Christians) with the establishment of sakoky. This Japanese term applies to a policy of national isolation instituted from 1633, and which barred all foreigners, except the Chinese and the Dutch, to enter the country, and interdicted the practice of Christianity. The interdiction to publicly profess Christianity in Japan ended in 1873. The Kakure Kirishitans remained secluded communities, until 15 members of this community approached the French priest Bernard Petitjean in 1865. This paper addresses the perception and discussion of these gruesome events of martyrdom both within and beyond Japan. It will be organised according to three main parts, which are:

(1) the insertion of these events within the specific political, cultural, social and religious environment of Tokugawa Japan, as well as of early modern Christian mission. These episodes and their perception are especially important within the relationship of two contemplative religions – Buddhism and Christianity. The 1614 edict proscribing Christianity described Japan as “the country of gods and of Buddha”. It condemned Christianity as the opponent of Japanese cultural and devotional background fusing Buddhism, Shintoism and Confucianism. Christianity, a new foreign religion, would thus be not allowed; In 1627, the martyrs of Nagasaki in 1597 were declared blessed. Indeed, the various Japanese episodes were soon appropriated by the culture of martyrdom characterising Christian circles in Europe (see the wars of religion opposing Protestants and Catholics, and the fascination for early Christian martyrdom) as beyond (as in Japan, Iberian expansionistic project overseas, which was highly determined by a missionary obligation to spread Christianity, was often “rewarded” with the blood of old and new Christians). According to the work *Societas Jesu ad sanguinis et vitae profusionem militans* (1675) by the Bohemian Jesuit Mathias Tanner, 304 Jesuits were distinguished with the crown of martyrdom between 1549 and the early 1670s.

(2) the formation of the new community of believers, the Kakure Kirishitans, with a clear identity of their own. The perseverance of a culture of martyrdom through rituals, their own organisation models, as well as the underlying theological and devotional framework until the 21st century will be presented. In view of the lack of priests, these communities organized themselves into *gonin-gumins*, a kind of sodalities and confraternities. Their religion is highly syncretic. To quote Christal Whelan, in the introduction to the book *The beginning of Heaven and Earth: the sacred books of Japan's hidden Christians*, 27-28, the *Tenchi*: “is a compilation of Christian legends, a

fusion of Buddhist and Christian cosmology, as well as myths explaining the origin of many Japanese customs.” Such a syncretism was often dictated by reasons of survival. These Japanese Christians used images of the Buddhist deity Kannon to revere Our Virgin Mary, and they camouflaged Christian shrines as Buddhist or Confucian temples.

(3) the comparison of this case study with the contemporary approaches to mission and martyrdom. Accordingly, some considerations will be made on the novel *Silence* (1966) by the Kakure Kirishitan Shusaku Endo, and its film version from 2016 directed by the educated Catholic Martin Scorsese. Eventually, this paper will interpret this case study within the contemporary theology of mission elaborated under Pope Francis in such documents such as the *Encyclical Letters Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* (2013), and *Laudato Si (The Concern for the Common Home)* (2015) and present some considerations on the meaning of martyrdom for the 21st Christian church.