

Conversion to Catholicism in Early Twentieth Century Japan

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Introduction

The history of Christianity in modern Japan is largely considered a history of Protestantism¹. In the context of intellectual Christian's, in particular, there are many popular Protestants (e.g., Inazō Nitobe, Jō Nijjima, Kanzō Uchimura). Contrary to this perception, the statistical data show that the number of Catholics was 58,261 and the number of Protestants was 31,631 in the early 20th century². This gap between popular perception and statistics is explained by the fact that Protestantism was mainly followed by the intellectual class, while Roman Catholicism was mainly practiced by the masses³. In fact, there were Catholics intellectuals such as Sōichi Iwashita, Yoshihiko Yoshimitsu, and Kōtarō Tanaka. In particular, there was a movement toward the fostering of Catholic intellectuals under the ideas of progressive priests focused on the Diocese of Tokyo. In fact, the Catholic Church in Japan at the beginning of the 20th century, from the Taishō era (1912–1926) to the early Showa era (1926–1945), acquired intellectuals, including those who had formerly practiced Protestantism⁴. It can be said that Catholicism attracted a certain number of intellectuals in Japan during the early 20th century. This paper tries to answer the question of why this phenomenon of conversion to Catholicism occurred in the early 20th century, from the perspective of Japanese intellectual history and the history of the Catholic Church in Japan.

1. Turning Point : The Catholic Church in Early 20th Century Japan

In the context of conversion to Catholicism, I would first like to outline the history of the Catholic Church in the Meiji period. When the ban on Christianity was lifted after the Meiji Restoration, missionaries from Europe and America came to Japan one after another. The Paris Society for Foreign Missions (*Société des missions étrangères du Paris*; MEP), from the Catholic Church, came to Japan in 1855⁵. The MEP held an exclusive right to evangelize Japan. Therefore, it is necessary to consider Catholicism in modern Japan as being closely connected to French Catholicism.

The defining characteristic of the MEP mission was its anti-modernism and emphasis on charity for others, especially poor people. They thought that Christians were supposed to keep their distance from the politics of the state and instead confront the problems created by rapid

¹ Kuyama Yasushi, ed., *Kindai nihon to Kiristokyo* [Christianity in Modern Japan], (Tokyo: Sō bunsha 創文社, 1956), p.318.

² Spae, Joseph J. "The Catholic Church in Japan." *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4, 1 (1963) :1-78. Yanagita, Tomonobu. *Christianity in Japan*. Sendai: Seisho Tosho Kankōkai (Bible Library Publishers), 1957.

³ Hanzawa, Takamaro 半沢孝麿, *Kindai nihon no katorishizumu* (Catholicism in Modern Japan) 『近代日本のカトリシズム』 (Tokyo: Misuzu shobō みすず書房, 1993).

⁴ Wakamatsu Eisuke calls this period the "Catholic Renaissance" (Wakamatsu, *Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko* 『吉満義彦』 Iwanami Shoten: Japan, 2014, p.23)

⁵ Ballhatchet, Helen J. "The Modern Missionary Movement in Japan: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox." In Mark R. Mullins, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, pp.35-68. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

modernization, such as poverty and economic disparity. Therefore, the Catholic Church conducted charitable activities, especially in rural areas, and led missionary activities such as relief and care for people with leprosy, and educational activities in rural areas. In this way, the most important practice of the MEP's religious mission was focused on individual salvation.

Against the backdrop of such missionary-led activities and a growing interest in Christianity as a whole, due to Europeanization, the number of baptized Catholics increased rapidly until the 1880s. However, in the 1890s, with the rise of nationalism, the perception of Christianity was completely reversed. Nationalistic intellectuals like Tesujiro Inoue 井上哲次郎 (1856–1944) insisted that Christianity was disrespect full to the State. The early 20th century was a difficult time for Christianity, and the Catholic Church was also facing a period of stagnation in its congregations.

In this difficult time, the Catholic Church was divided mainly into two opposing factions. The first wanted to maintain the traditional position of keeping a distance from politics, and continuing the mission of individual salvation in rural areas. The other desired to be actively involved in politics and develop a mission to influence the intellectuals in order to object to nationalist discourses. In the Diocese of Tokyo, the latter position was taken mainly by Father Chota Maeda 前田長太 (1866–1939) and Father François Alfred Ligneul, MEP (1847–1922). They believed that missionary work among the intellectuals was important, and vigorously worked to publish magazines such as *New Ideals* 『新理想』. However, the missionaries of the MEP, who took the traditional position, regarded the activities of Maeda and Ligneul as claiming rebellious independence from the Catholic Church, and while Maeda returned to Japan, Ligneul was transferred to Hong Kong.

It was in such a stagnant situation, that Sōichi Iwashita 岩下壮一 (1889–1940), one of the most important figures in modern Japanese Catholicism, appeared in the Taisho era (1912–1926)⁶. Iwashita was baptized at Gyosei Junior High School and became a Catholic. He went on to study philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University. After studying in Europe, he was ordained in Rome by the Vatican Archbishop, and returned to Japan in 1925 as a missionary affiliated with the Diocese of Rome. Iwashita held an equal position with the French missionaries, because he was able to come to Japan as a missionary with an overseas affiliation. Therefore, he continued to develop his own missionary activities without belonging to any particular church. Iwashita exerted great influence over young intellectuals. For example, he founded the Society for Catholic Studies at the Tokyo Imperial University, published a research journal *Catholic* (『カトリック』) and wrote books to spread the Catholic faith to the Japanese intellectual world. In addition, Iwashita actively argued with non-church Protestant scholars from the standpoint of Catholicism, and based his arguments on the anti-modernism he had studied. In this context, Iwashita's activities led to a number of people converting to Catholicism, especially from among the non-church Protestants.

2. The Logic of Conversion: Focusing on Yoshihiko Yoshimitsu

With the rise in the popularity of Sōichi Iwashita, a number of young intellectuals, mainly students of Tokyo Imperial University, converted to Catholicism in the latter half of the 1920s. They included

⁶ Miyoshi, Chiharu, *Toki no Kaidan wo orinagara: Kindai Nihon Katorikku Kyokaishi jyosetsu* [Descending the stairs of time: The history of Catholic Church in Modern Japan] 『時の階段を下りながら: 近代日本カトリック教会史序説』 Orience Syukyo Kenkyujo, 2021.

Yoshihiko Yoshimitsu, Kotaro Tanaka, Bunsaku Nakao, Akira Osawa, and Shiden Inoue, all of whom converted from Non-church Protestantism. Non-church Protestantism consisted of a group of Christians who shared the idea of not recognizing the authority of the church as advocated by Kanzō Uchimura (内村鑑三). It has been called “Made in Japan Christianity” as an example of an indigenization of Christianity that is unique to Japan⁷. However, in the late 1920s, there was a transition from Uchimura to the second generation that converted to Catholicism.

Under these circumstances, Sōichi Iwashita was able to explain the significance of the Catholic Church to the Protestant intellectuals, and persuaded them to convert to Catholicism. To answer the question of the motivations for their conversion, I would like to look at the story of the conversion of Yoshihiko Yoshimitsu.

Yoshimitsu studied at Daiichi High School, where he joined the Christian Youth Association (YMCA), and the Bible study group led by Kanzo Uchimura. He had become a non-church Protestant in 1922. In 1925, he joined the Department of Ethics, Faculty of Letters, Tokyo Imperial University, and during this time, under the influence of Father Sōichi Iwashita, he converted to Catholicism. After graduating from the university in 1928, he went to France on Iwashita’s recommendation to study under Jacques Maritain. After returning to Japan in the fall of 1930, he studied philosophy at Sophia University, The Tokyo Public Theological Seminary, and the Department of Ethics in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Tokyo. Yoshimitsu was strongly influenced by Sōichi Iwashita, and as one of Iwashita’s favorite disciples, he became active as a philosopher in modern Japan.

The process of Yoshimitsu’s conversion can be found in the essay “My Conversion,” published in 1931, in the journal *Catholic*. The essay was actually commissioned by Sōichi Iwashita. During his stay in Paris, Yoshimitsu received the following letter from Iwashita :

I would like you (ed., Yoshimitsu) to write and send me an article titled “How I Became a Catholic”, so that I can better understand the contradictions within the non-church movement. Members of our study group at the Imperial University are all ex-protestants.” (May 12, 1929, to Mr. Yoshimitsu in Paris, Life of Father Iwashita.)⁸

The original title of “How I Became a Catholic” is an alteration of “How I Became a Christian,” an essay by Kanzo Uchimura. Iwashita seems to have expected Yoshimitsu to write something that would have an impact like Uchimura’s essay, and prove the correctness of the Catholic faith over that of non-church Christianity. In response to this letter, Yoshimitsu wrote a simple essay detailing the process of his conversion⁹. From the contents of the essay, I would like to point out three things about Yoshimitsu’s conversion.

First, Yoshimitsu began his journey in Christianity as a Protestant, but after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, he began to move toward the Catholic Church¹⁰. He said that he was attracted to

⁷ Mullins, Mark R. *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements*. Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 1998.

⁸ Kobayashi, Yoshio. *Iwashita Shoichi shinpu no syogai* (The Life of Father Iwashita Sōichi)「岩下壯一神父の生涯」Tokyo : ōzorasha 大空社, 1988, p.247.

⁹ Yoshimitsu, Yoshihiko 吉満義彦, “Watashi no Kaishū” (My Conversion)「私の改宗」, in *Catholic*『カトリック』, 1931, pp. 12-20.

the Catholic Church because it was a place where people could just “pray.” The earthquake in Tokyo had caused many casualties, but the Catholic Church’s attitude toward the salvation of the people moved young men like Yoshimitsu, and gave him a chance to go to church. In the Taisho era, along with rapid modernization, various social problems posed by the process of modernization came to the surface. During this period, the discovery of the church was an indicator of anti-modernism or a way to achieve individual salvation.

On the other hand, for young men like Yoshimitsu, the teachings of the Catholic Church seemed to be boring, with its emphasis on miracles and basic explanations of the Trinity. Under these circumstances, Yoshimitsu, who was conflicted about his faith, entered the Imperial University. It is here that he met Sōichi Iwashita, who became an influencing figure for him to convert to Catholicism¹¹. Yoshimitsu’s philosophy department at Tokyo Imperial University concentrated on the German idealism of Kant and Hegel, and he found such an idealistic way of thinking unacceptable. In this context, he was taught Catholicism as a “philosophy” through Neo-Thomism based on French Catholicism. Yoshimitsu, who was troubled both in his studies and in his faith, found the harmony of reason and faith in this idea of Catholicism and the teachings of Thomas Aquinas on nature and grace. He felt as if these ideals were the answer to his problems. The neo-Thomism of Iwashita provided the Japanese philosophical community with a different view of German idealism.

The last item of discussion is Yoshimitsu’s criticism of non-church Protestantism. He criticized the sect as a subjectivist interpretation of Christianity, because they interpreted the Bible from the standpoint of the first person. He argued against them from the perspective of the importance of balancing subjective and objective faiths, in other words, the harmony of reason and faith, or nature and grace, as Thomas called them.

Conclusion

The conversion of Japanese Christian intellectuals to Catholicism in the late 1920s was influenced by the personality and thoughts of Sōichi Iwashita. Yoshimitsu’s conversion was influenced by Iwashita, as were his belief in Catholicism as a philosophy, his conversion from non-church Protestantism, his thorough anti-modernism, and his sympathy for the Catholic Church’s stance on prayer. These reasons are cited as the primary influences in the process of Catholic conversions in Japan during this period.

There is often criticism that modern Japanese Catholics are West-centric and do not acknowledge issues that are the incarnation of Japanese culture¹². However, this does not mean that Japanese Catholics fell into Western-centrism without negotiating with Japanese culture. For future research, it will be important to consider the issue of Japan and the West as interculturally mediated by Christianity and to study Catholicism in modern Japan in this context.

¹⁰ Yoshimitsu, Yoshihiko 吉満義彦, *Watashi no Kaishū*, “It was around the time of the earthquake. I finally began to turn my mind to this Catholic Church”, p. 14.

¹¹ Yoshimitsu, Yoshihiko 吉満義彦, *Watashi no Kaishū*, “I visited Mr. ‘I’ one day. This is a day that I will never forget. I had found a lighthouse to rely on.”

¹² Mullins, Mark R, “Between Inculturation and Globalization: The Situation of Catholicism in Contemporary Japanese Society” (Kevin M. Doak, ed., *Xavier’s Legacies: Catholicism in Modern Japanese Culture*, Vancouver, 2011, pp. 169–192) .