FROM FRANCIS TO PERRY
Japan's Reluctant Opening to the Western World

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In the year 1865 a group of 15 peasants entered a newly-built Church in Nagasaki and cautiously approached Fr. Bernard Petitjean, the first Christian missionary to be on Japanese soil for two and a half centuries, and confided, "The heart of all of us here is the same as yours," and then they asked to see an image of "*Maruya-sama.*" Tonight I want to explore the convoluted story of the encounters between westerners and Japan that eventually led to the strange religion of the "*Kakure Kirishitans* – the Hidden Christians of Southern Japan, and to the opening of Japan to the Western World.

The first knowledge of Japan came from Marco Polo's account of his adventures in the Far East. Although he never set foot on the island kingdom he called Zipangu, he described a mysterious country of fabulous wealth where the king's palace was covered with gold. According to some scholarly opinions, it was this account of Zipangu and its gold, rather than the spices of India, that inspired Christopher Columbus' voyage of discovery. Whether that is true or not, there was great interest during the age of exploration in the reputedly rich land that lay to the East of China.

Actually, the first encounter between Japan and the West occurred fifty years after Columbus' fateful voyage when three Portuguese adventurers involved in merchant activities in China were blown off course by a fierce monsoon storm and were shipwrecked on the island of Tanegashima, twenty miles south of Kyushu. The local Japanese had never seen such strange men with their huge noses and mustaches, and who exuded an unbearable stench to the natives whose daily baths were both hygiene and recreation. The Japanese had hot tubs for centuries before the idea occurred in the West, and during my five years there, my nightly soak in the *ofuro* was a sybaritic and relaxing experience. Because their ship arrived from the south, the Portuguese sailors were called *nanbanjin*, or southern barbarians. The Asian Art Museum has a fine pair of Sixteenth Century six panel *nanban* screens, dating from the period when foreigners were a novelty in Japan, showing Portuguese ships in Japanese ports. The Portuguese, on the other hand, found themselves in a land unlike any they had seen. To their amazement, they discovered in Japan a courtly life of the utmost refinement with great castles and palaces, lacquered Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples and an elaborate system of etiquette, baffling in its complexity.

Other Portuguese adventurers soon followed this small band of merchants, and in 1547 a Japanese man wanted for murder escaped his fate by stowing away on a Portuguese ship. That man named Yajiro, landed in the Portuguese colony of Goa, converted to Christianity, learned Portuguese and convinced the Jesuit, Francis Xavier, that Japan was ripe for evangelization. Consequently, Francis and two other Jesuit missionaries, accompanied by Yajiro as their interpreter landed in Kagoshima on the southern tip of Kyushu on August 15, 1549.

Because their interpreter, Yajiro, was only semi-literate he translated the Latin Deus as *Dainichi*, the supreme deity of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, and it was not until two years later that Francis learned to his horror that Christianity was being perceived as a Buddhist sect. He immediately sent his fellow missionaries into the streets

warning the people not to worship this *Dainichi*, who was the devil's invention. In spite of this rocky start, the Jesuits had considerable success, and within five years the number of Christian converts numbered over four thousand. The local *daimyo,* or warlords, were quick to perceive the advantage in offering hospitality to the missionaries, for along with them came the Portuguese ships and their cargoes of much sought-after Chinese silk, in return for which the Portuguese traders received quantities of Japanese silver. The Portuguese middlemen were necessary since the Japanese were forbidden, because of their piratical tendencies, to land their junks on the China coast. The Jesuits used their connection with commercial interests to their advantage by encouraging the trading ships to stop only at ports where the *daimyo* was friendly toward their missionary efforts.

The collusion between the Jesuits and their traders with the local warlords was most evident in Nagasaki, the place where Christian missionary work was resumed in the Nineteenth Century and where the Hidden Christians "came out of the closet." In 1562, only thirteen years after Francis landed, the lord of Nagasaki, induced no doubt as much by monetary as by religious principles, converted to Christianity and decreed that his fiefdom become Christian, expelling anyone who did not embrace the new religion. Within months, 20,000 people had been baptized, along with the monks from sixty Buddhist monasteries, thereby transforming an insignificant fishing village into an international trading center. Of course if it had remained a fishing village Nagasaki would not have had the distinction of being one of only two cities in the world to experience the horror of nuclear bombing. It is ironic that ground zero of the second atomic bomb was the Christian Cathedral in the center of the largest Christian population in Japan.

Within fifty years of Francis' landing, the Christian population in Japan had reached 150,000, but the missionaries' very success was to lead to the hubris that eventually brought about their downfall and led to the outlawing of the Christian religion for two and a half centuries.

One blatant example of the growing arrogance of the Portuguese was Captain Andre Pessoa. His ship, *Our Lady of Grace*, put in at Nagasaki, carrying a staggering 200 tons of fine Chinese silk and a huge stockpile of silver bullion, the richest ship ever seen in Nagasaki. The governor sent an emissary to inspect the cargo and Captain Pessoa haughtily refused to allow the governor's inspector to board the ship. He escalated his effrontery by refusing to allow the governor himself on board. When the Shogun, Ieyasu, learned of the incident, he was enraged at such arrogance and decreed that the ship be seized and the cargo confiscated. Captain Pessoa scuttled the ship with all hands on board rather than submit to being captured by the Japanese.

The straw that broke the camels back causing Ieyasu to decide to get rid of the Christians was when he discovered that the priests were openly teaching their flocks to obey the padres over and above their feudal lords. In 1614 the shogun characterized Christianity, as "the germ of a great disaster, which must be crushed." All foreign Christians were to leave or to face one of five punishments – branding, nose slitting, amputation of the feet, castration, or death. Japanese converts were to become Buddhists, and all Churches were destroyed. In 1639 a Christian uprising on the *Shimabara* Peninsula in Kyushu was brutally crushed and 37,000 Christians were massacred. After that battle Japan became a closed country. All Portuguese traders were prohibited and only the Dutch East India Company was allowed to trade in Japan, for the Dutch had no interests in the religious affairs of Japan. But even the Dutch were confined to the tiny

island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbor. It was at about that time that the Shogun decreed that the New Year's festival include the practice of *e-fumi*, in which every villager had to trample on a bronze image of Mary or Jesus to prove their renunciation of the Christian religion. New Year's is the greatest of many festivals in Japan – one in which every man, woman and child participates. When I lived there everything closed for three days; it was impossible to buy a loaf of bread or a gallon of gas or anything else.

At the time of the banning of Christianity, there were estimated to be about 300,000 Christians, of whom perhaps half went underground and continued to practice what they remembered of the Catholic faith. Most of the converts had only rudimentary instruction, since at the peak of the missionary effort there were only 137 priests in the country. Consequently there was some considerable melding of Buddhism and Christianity, and over the generations with no contact with the West, that synchronistic trend undoubtedly intensified. While living in Japan, I acquired a bronze cross with Buddha sitting in the lotus position at the center, and in Shimabara there is a full-sized statue of *Kannon*, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, holding a baby.

A startling discovery made by the Nineteenth Century Christian missionaries was that of the sacred book of the secret Christians, *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, The Beginnings of Heaven and Earth, Since the Bible had never been translated into Japanese, the underground Christians had only oral tradition and certain prayers they had memorized, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Salve Regina and the Apostles' Creed. The *Tenchi*, probably dating from the early Seventeenth Century, is a collection of Christian legends, a fusion of Buddhist and Christian cosmology and theology, and myths explaining the origin of various Japanese customs.

When the secret Christians were taken into the Catholic Church they gave Fr. Petitjean, a copy of the *Tenchi.* He examined it and commented, "We have found some errors, but they are of little consequence." That appraisal is startling to say the least, given the text, and later Catholic clergy pronounced the *Tenchi* worthless. For example, in the account of the Garden of Eden story, when God becomes angry at the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the offenders prostrate themselves before him and offer a *Salve Regina*, an Eleventh Century hymn to the Queen of Heaven, whereupon they are expelled, and Eve is turned into a dog and in the words of the text, "disappeared to who knows where." Also Mary, as a beautiful 12 year old, spurns an offer of marriage from the king and is taken up to heaven in a flower wagon. When she returns to earth the Lord came to her in the form of a butterfly that flew into her mouth and she became pregnant. Her parents expelled her for being pregnant outside of wedlock, and throughout the entire story, Joseph is nowhere to be found.

Of the 50,000 or so hidden Christians remaining when Japan was reopened, only about half were willing to give up their tradition and rejoin the Catholic Church. Today, the numbers of those who still cling to their religion are dwindling, and only a few congregations in the Goto Islands off the coast of Kyushu remain. Most have been assimilated into Buddhist congregations, and the *Tenchi,* which served the Secret Christians for two centuries, is no longer in use.

On April 12th, 1600, at about the time when Portuguese and Spanish missionary activity was at its zenith, one of the great adventure stories of that adventurous age began to be enacted. It was a strange scenario, one that led to the further opening of Japan to the West, and it was a tale with a most unlikely hero. William Adams was born to a working

class family in the English fishing village of Gillingham, England. Adams spent his formative years in the slums of the Limehouse District of London, and through the vagaries of fate, rose to become a great Japanese lord and the confidante of the powerful founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, a dynasty that was to last for two and a half centuries. James Clavell, in his best-selling novel, Shogun, except for the Harlequin Romance love motif imposed on medieval Japan, quite accurately retold the story of William Adams,

Having been trained as a shipwright and pilot, and with several years on merchant ships, Adams was employed by a Dutch consortium to be a pilot on a major voyage to the Far East with a flotilla of five Dutch vessels. Twenty months after setting sail, having endured fierce storms and clashes with bloodthirsty natives, only one of the five ships was afloat. The last twenty-four survivors were facing certain death by starvation when land was sighted, and on April 12, 1600, the crew dragged themselves ashore in the very same harbor on the island of Tanegashima, where the first Portuguese adventurers had landed almost sixty years earlier.

Adams apparently possessed the nine lives of a cat. Having escaped the hazards of terrible storms and the attacks of spear-wielding natives, Adams now found himself threatened by the Catholic missionaries. Having told the natives that Christendom was a single monolith ruled by the Pope, they were appalled at the advent of a band of Protestants. They attempted to have the shipwrecked seamen executed, but the governor was loath to make such a weighty decision, particularly in light of the cargo stowed on the *Liefde*, the remaining ship of the Dutch fleet. So he sent word to Ieyasu, asking his bidding. The ship carried a vastly different cargo from that of the Portuguese; there were crates of woolen cloth, glass beads and branches of coral, nails, hammers, scythes and mattocks. But the most interest was raised by the enormous amount of weaponry - cannon, muskets and coats of mail.

Ieyasu was a shrewd warrior, and perceiving the strangers as a potential asset in his military ventures, he had Adams brought before him. Impregnable and forbidding from the outside, Osaka Castle contained an enchanted world of pleasure gardens with pools and bridges and miniature waterfalls, teahouses and a sumptuous interior, bedecked with colorful silks and precious metals. Adams of Limehouse was overwhelmed and Ieyasu was intrigued. In fact, he granted Adams immediate admittance to his presence, a privilege only the greatest of lords enjoyed.

Ieyasu discovered that Adams was trained as a shipwright, and he had the Englishman, who was given the title of *Anjin-san*, or Mister Pilot, build copies of Adam's ship, the *Liefde.* Because Ieyasu was so delighted with his new vessels he determined to prevent Adams from leaving the country, and he granted him the title of *Hatamoto,* which made him a direct retainer of the court. Along with the honor came a vast country estate, containing several villages and hundreds of people, to all of whom he was absolute master. One could not imagine a greater disparity than that between the splendor of his life in Japan and the squalid poverty of his life in Limehouse. Fate had, indeed, dealt him a strange hand, and he played it well. The lad from Limehouse rose to a position of power and prominence that only a handful of Japanese could even dream of achieving; he amassed a fortune and he could even claim to some small share in the founding of the Tokugawa dynasty. Adams never returned to England, although he maintained a

correspondence with his wife there, and he provided financial for his English family. He died in Japan in 1620, at the age of 55, probably of malaria.

Ieyasu founded a deeply conservative dynasty. He was determined to protect the country from all foreign influence, and he was also determined to prevent all change from occurring internally. Over time the total seclusion of the nation became a somewhat leaky vessel, as control by the central government was eroded by the growing power of the local lords. For obvious reasons, Japanese scholars were also restive under the exclusion policy; they wanted to benefit from the advances in science and technology made by West, particularly in medicine and military technology.

After abortive efforts to open Japan, on July 8, 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry steamed into the harbor of Uraga near Tokyo. The Asian Art Museum recently had a comprehensive exhibit on Perry and the "Black Ships," including a number of woodblock prints showing the Japanese conception of westerners, all with slanted eyes. The flotilla was far more formidable than anything the Japanese had seen, and they were taken by the fact that the ships were black, covered with tar to prevent leaks. After delivering a letter from President Franklin Pierce stating that the United States had friendly intentions toward Japan, Perry left promising that he would return in the following year with a larger force to negotiate a treaty, leaving the Japanese to ponder their options. When Perry returned with a more imposing flotilla, the Japanese agreed, after some attempts at evasion and delay, to move a step closer to normalizing relations with the United States. The treaty of Kanagawa, signed on March 31, 1854, opened two ports to limited trade and provided for consular representation. Similar treaties with Great Britain, Russia and Holland were signed the next year.

During the negotiations the American officers on shore leave found the Japanese public to be good natured and friendly and intensely curious about their strange visitors and their ways. I can attest that there are no people on earth so possessed of curiosity as the Japanese. The negotiators were equally good-natured and showed a convivial spirit, especially when stimulated by the alcoholic beverages served by the Americans. In my own experiences I found that alcohol seems to make the Japanese expansive and happy. What most interested those who were invited on board as negotiators were the armaments, and it was not long before they had adapted what they saw, strengthening their own coastal defenses. Having decided to open the country they did so with gusto, thirsty for the knowledge available from the West. In 1855, only a year after the Treaty of Kanagawa, the *Yogakusho*, or School for Foreign Studies was opened, and a year later a governmental office for the study of foreign documents was established.

The first consul, Townsend Harris, arrived in Japan in 1856, and subsequently another treaty was signed with the United States in 1858 providing for extra-territorial jurisdiction and a fixed customs tariff, and again similar agreements were reached with Great Britain, Russia and Holland. From Perry's momentous entry into Tokyo Bay, Japan has been a part of the international community. The attempt by Ieyasu to create an isolated Japan was from the beginning doomed to failure, but even so, the closed country of the Tokugawa Dynasty lasted for a longer time than the United States has been in existence.

My own experience of Japan was profound. Like Francis Xavier, I went to Japan as a missionary, hoping to make some small change in Japanese culture. Instead I found my own life changed in ways I could not have imagined in my prior state of innocence.

My encounter with Japan was a fascinating and intensely maturing process and my heart echoes the sentiment of the first missionary to enter the Island Kingdom, Francis Xavier, who said, "These people are the delight of my heart."