Orientalism and Monotheism in Studies of Early Japanese Christianity

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'*What the Japanese of that time believed in was not our God*'
(Cristóvão Ferreira in Endō Shūsaku [1969] 1980:147).

Abstract

In the wake of Said's landmark work, *Orientalism* (Said 1979), scholars have been widely concerned with countering the value-laden interpretations which have historically traveled with 'colonialist' or 'Orientalist' analyses of religions in Japan. However, modern studies of early Japanese Christianity, i.e., Japan's *Kakure Kirishitan* (*hidden Christians*), despite their emergence in the 'post-colonialist world', have often maintained a subterranean, Orientalizing tendency to generalize and abstract an inauthentic or compromised Christianity of early modern Japan against that of a more genuinely Christian West. *Kakure* interpretations of monotheism, the doctrine of the Trinity, and certain worship practices are portrayed as 'polytheistic', 'syncretistic', and as uniquely serious misunderstandings or abrogations of both 'Christian theology' and the very concept of monotheism. Meanwhile, Western Christianities, despite their own analogous and statistically-demonstrable penchant for misconception and theological imagination, are subsequently implied to be more authentically or quintessentially monotheistic or Christian. This essentializing configuration betrays an *a priori* separation of 'Japanese' and 'Western' religions and raises the question as to whether analysts operating in the 'post-colonial era' have yet to become fully aware of the basic warning of Said's *Orientalism* – a still-timely message which is not, as some seem to believe, centered on the errors of a specifically Western hegemony, but on the dangers of otherizing in general as a form of devaluation.

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Introduction

While capacious definitions and a wide-ranging applicability in the social sciences have left 'little consensus' regarding not only the scope but the relevance of 'post-colonial' inquiry (Goulet 2011:631), interested scholars have detected 'no more dramatic shift' in modern post-colonial studies than the wide realization of the role of religion in both historical colonial processes and in developments within the so-called post-colonial world (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin [2000] 2007:188)[1]. Having experienced what Richard King describes as a Copernican turn in light of post-colonial trends (King 2017:11-14), the academic study of religion itself has been deeply concerned with the 'political' situation of religions and the formative pressure of asymmetric power relations on cross-cultural religious exchange. Regularly forefronted in this discourse have been the many scholarly allegations of an acutely Western imposition of universal concepts in the study of religion on non-Western contexts – e.g., taxonomies of religion, 'religious studies', and the very category of 'religion' (Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 1997; McCutcheon 1997, 1998; Arnal & McCutcheon 2013; cf. Schilbrack 2010, 2012) – a discussion which has also been significant in contemporary studies of religion in Japan (Josephson 2012; cf. Kleine 2013; Amstutz 2014). At the same time, following the anti-colonialist emphasis of the mid-to-late 20th century, post-colonialist scholars have expanded criticisms of Western hegemony to include negative portraits of Christian missionaries as rapacious agents of imperialism and of Christianity itself as 'not a saving grace but a monolithic and aggressive force' (Andrews 2009:663-664). This image of a Christianity which imposes universalizing categories and concepts onto 'local' or 'ethnic' particularizations of

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[1] Since the electrifying advent of Said's *Orientalism* in 1979, 'post-colonial' methodology has continued to quest for its own identity (cf. Gandhi 1998; Prasad 2003; Bernard, Elmarsafy, & Murray 2016). Meanwhile the study of religion has likewise been preoccupied with the refinement of its own 'post-colonial' lens and has alternatively interpreted this methodology from Marxist and deconstructionist vantage points, even attempting to blend the two (Goulet 2011:631-632; cf. Gandhi 1998:viii-ix, 3).

'culture' is understood to be supported by the categorical separation of cultures and religions into the universal and the particular by both Western historians (cf. Masuzawa 2005:76-79; Bergunder [2010] 2011:52) and the specific histories of Western missions like those of the Jesuits (cf. Casanova 2016: 271; Blackburn 2000:48-49, 84). Given this atmosphere, it is not surprising that the modern study of Christianity in early modern Japan, a religion introduced to the Japanese by Jesuit missions in the 16th century, has at times viewed the idea of monotheism – so often cast as a 'universal' concept in religion (Erlewine 2010:15-16) – as a 'highly political concept' which was (and is?) bound up with an insistence on 'the supremacy of Christianity' and by extension Western civilization (Fukai 2010:219; cf. also Masuzawa 2005:xiii-xiv). However, at the same time, developments have occurred in the study of monotheism itself which have aimed to clarify this long-debated comparative category (Tuggy 2017) and also its legacy in Western studies of Japanese religion[2]. What sort of relations are we now able to map between the situation of the concept of monotheism in early modern Japanese Christianity, the latitude of this subject in contemporary scholarship, and the 'Orientalism' decried by Said (1979) and those following in his wake[3]?

First we should establish what is meant by 'Orientalism' in the context of this study. While the particular usefulness of Said's *Orientalism* has entertained persistent debate (Phan 2012:20-21), scholars of religion have on the one hand widely utilized the first of Said's several interrelated definitions as an acutely 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 1979:3), and have thus frequently internalized the post-colonial agenda as an effort to liberate non-Western contexts from the hegemonic imposition of Western religion, Western modes of religious study, and ultimately from the confines of power relations structured according to Western interests. On the other hand, scholars have also widely accepted

[2] I engage this subject in a forthcoming monograph.

[3] Scholars from a variety of backgrounds have examined and often excoriated Orientalism and its relations with religion in the last several decades (cf. Asad 1993; Rafael 1993; King 1999; Paramore [2016] 2018; cf. also Paramore 2013). Critiques of Orientalism in the study of Japanese religion have often focused on Buddhism, especially the predicament of a marginalized Pure Land tradition by Orientalizing forces in both Western analysis and nationalistic presentations of Zen (cf. Faure 1993; Sharf 1994; Borup 2004; Amstutz 1997; Porcu 2008; Freiberger 2003; Kleine 2013).

Said's additional identification of Orientalism (perhaps the 'starting point' of these power relations) as a 'style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"' (Said 1979:2). In this light, contemporary images of the political localities of religions have regularly emphasized the constructive role of bi-directional 'Orientalizing' and 'Occidentalizing' cultural dichotomies. While Euro-American interests have certainly boasted a long legacy of framing 'Eastern' religions in generalizing and ultimately subversive ways, so too have 'Eastern' centers of study, e.g., religious studies in Japan, been found to have expressed the relation between 'Japanese religions' and those of 'the West' through a polarizing East-West framework (cf. Porcu 2008:3). It is this pattern of cultural dichotomization that I have in view when I refer to 'Orientalism'.

The present question is as to whether or not this dichotomous and widely-criticized approach to the study of religions has been sufficiently abandoned in studies of early Japanese Christian theology, that is, the teachings of the *Kakure Kirishitan* (*hidden Christians*) – the Japanese Christians who were once driven underground by the harsh persecutions of the Tokugawa shogunate and whose descendants improbably reemerged in Western consciousness in the 1860s[4]. Is it possible that in an earnest attempt to rectify the first kind of Orientalism described above (the subversive imposition of Western religions and modes of study in non-Western contexts) that some studies of *Kakure Kirishitan* theology have unwittingly contributed to the second kind of Orientalism in which preconceived notions of 'East' and 'West' have informed a culturalist and ultimately misleading dichotomization of 'Japanese' versus 'Western' Christianity?

It already seems quite clear that the post-colonial turn has manifested in the general study of Japanese religions as an impulse to separate Japan from perceptibly Western (i.e., Christian) concepts, categories, and terminologies. Terms like 'religion', 'liturgy', 'prayer', 'doctrine', and, of course, 'monotheism', have been instinctively jettisoned or excluded, perhaps as the

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[4] Japan's *Kirishitan* have remained a perennial subject of fascination in both Western and Japanese-language studies, significant examples of which include Boxer (1951), Elison ([1973] 1991), Turnbull (1998), Paramore (2009), Tagita (1954), Kataoka (1984), Ebisawa (1966), Ebisawa and Ōuchi (1970), Higashibaba (2001).

tools of an implicit Western colonialism, and despite any potentially scientific value – part of an initiative which has sometimes been motivated by a palpable Japanese nationalism and at other times by an earnest post-colonial aim to prioritize Japanese self-definition, i.e., to 'let the subaltern speak' (to borrow from Spivak [1985] 2010; cf. Caldarola 1982:652; Araki 2004:222-223). One result of this approach, for better or worse, has been that 'Japanese spirituality' or the 'religious consciousness of Japan', whatever it is in truth, has become not only 'non-Western' but 'anti-Western' (and at least implicitly 'anti-Christian' (cf. Amstutz 1997:xii, 120-121). Through this scholarly lens, and subsequently through public discourse in Japan, an emancipated 'Japanese religion' has been broadly distilled as a Buddhist-Shinto eclecticism, an inherently 'peaceful' and 'tolerant' form of 'polytheism' (*tashinkyō*) – a force not created in a vacuum but one designed to be set against a comparably 'intolerant' and 'violent' Western concept of religion, i.e., 'monotheism' (*isshinkyō*) (cf. Porcu 2008:2-3; Dessì 2020:54; Kohara 2010:96; cf. 2006:65).

This separation of Japan and the West on an axis of monotheism is not at all surprising given Japan's troublesome history with 'myths of Japanese uniqueness' (Dale 1986), and given how enthusiastically Western scholars of various disciplines have announced that 'the West' is a 'monotheistic civilization', and that 'monotheism sets us apart [from the rest of humanity, and that m]onotheism lies at the root of our way of thinking, determining all the other layers of our consciousness and permeating every aspect of our culture and every sphere of our social life' (Greenfeld 2011:7). Recent Japanese critiques of the concept of monotheism are quite clearly a targeted reaction to this narrative of Western civilization in which '[t]he Monotheistic God…was understood as a basis for Western supremacy in religion' (Fukai 2010:219). Japanese criticisms have thus attempted 'to advocate unique Japanese (and not Christian European or Christian American) values and polytheism in order to claim a Japanese and Asian value system against Western monotheism [and] the society and value system it produces' (Fukai 2010:223; cf. also Ueda 1999; Umehara 1995:40, 158; Ueno 2005:234-235). This particularization of an essentialized 'Japanese religion', and, relatedly, an essentialized 'Japanese mind', is a nationalistic reaction to a cross-cultural crisis which has

by no means been limited to a contemporary Japanese discourse or to a specific engagement with the 'Occident'[5].

How has this post-colonial (and again, frequently nationalistic) impulse towards the extrication of 'Japanese' and 'Western' religions manifested in studies of early modern Japanese Christianity – a phenomenon which must represent, on the assumption of a categorical tension between Christianity and Japan, a paradoxical existence between worlds?

Japan and Monotheism: A Relationship of Non-Comprehension?

Scholarly analysis of *Kakure Kirishitan* theology has been significantly informed by a background assumption of a total lack of monotheism in Japanese religious history. Western scholars have flatly characterized Japanese religions in general as 'polytheistic' (or in some cases as 'animistic'), and above all, as 'not monotheistic' (e.g., Picken 2011:xi; Mason 1935:99; Aston 1905:53; Scheid 2006-2007:327; Parratt 2012:63; Turnbull 1998:16). From this starting point it has been widely assumed that from the moment Jesuit missionaries first touched down on the sandy shores of Kagoshima in 1549, the traditional Christian doctrine that there is one supreme God (and, additionally, the Trinitarian doctrine that there is 'one God in three Persons') was doomed by a cultural pre-conditioning which suppressed Japanese recognition and reception of such ideas (cf. Whelan 1996:33).

Thus, the Japanese people in general, including the early *Kirishitan*, have been viewed as guilty of simply 'misunderstanding' the concept of 'one all-powerful creator-God' and 'the Trinity' (Harrington 1980:334). Japanese scholars have strongly concurred with this general portrait of non-comprehension, insisting that in premodern Japan there was simply 'no concept of a creator God' and therefore nothing on which the Jesuit missionaries and the first Japanese Christians could draw (Kawai 1994:52; cf. also Ueda 1984:17-33). Since Japan had 'never known' concepts like monotheism or a

5 For example, in the mid-to-late 18th century, renowned *kokugaku* (national learning) scholar Norinaga Motoori (1730-1801) commandeered an Orientalizing style of thought to frame 'the Chinese mind' as antithetical to 'the Japanese mind' and depicted a battle between a domineering, universalizing prescription of China vs. the particularity of Japan (cf. Ueno 2005:235).

creator God, the Japanese people simply 'had much difficulty understanding them' (Fujiwara 2012:174).

The apparent failure of the *Kakure Kirishitan* in particular to maintain an 'Orthodox' vision of Catholic theological concepts, supposedly evidenced by their capacious view of spiritual beings and their creative interpretations of the Trinity in their text *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* (*the beginning of heaven and earth*), have strengthened the aforementioned image of a Japan that is especially drawn to 'heresy' and/or is peculiarly incompatible with the concept of monotheism[6]. Kamstra once spoke of the *Kakure Kirishitan* as a group which exemplifies 'how the Japanese mind conceives and modifies typical Western ideas such as monotheism' (Kamstra 1993:139). Easily observable in Kamstra is an essentialization and abstraction of the 'Japanese mind' as something uniquely or especially unreceptive to monotheism, something which only absorbs monotheism insofar as it can transform it. Since there is no sliding scale of monotheism (i.e., no grades between one god and two or more), Kamstra's view is essentially that the 'Japanese mind' can only 'modify' monotheism into something that is 'Japanese', i.e., something that is 'not monotheism'. As Miyazaki Kentarō similarly concludes, the *Kakure Kirishitan* cannot truly be Christian since they insist upon a 'very Japanese [view of multiple spiritual beings and have] so transformed [their theological inheritance that it has become] thoroughly Japanese [and] quite distant [from a] Christian monotheistic worldview' (Miyazaki 2003:31).

This is, more or less, the same view of Japan as a religious 'swamp' so famously painted by Catholic author Endō Shūsaku in his novel *Silence* (*Chinmoku*) – a place where Christian ideas like monotheism, having no foundation in the Japanese world, can only be swallowed up and recapitulated as something less than Christian (cf. Endō [1969] 1980:147-150; cf. also 1992:144-211). Despite believing that Catholic doctrine is universal, Endō himself provides an interesting case of a Japanese Christian who 'sought to differentiate Japanese religiosity from western monotheism' (Mase-Hasega-

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[6] The *Tenchi* was transmitted through *Kakure* communities both orally and as a manuscript tradition, at least in Nagasaki, the rural Sotome coast, and the five Gotō islands off the coast of Kyūshū (Nosco 1993:13) – but these were written perhaps no earlier than the 1820s (Turnbull 1996:63). For an English translation, cf. Whelan (1996); for annotated Japanese texts, cf. Tagita (1954:83-163) and Ebisawa, Cieslik, Tadao, and Mitsunobu (1970:382-409).

wa 2008:64). In the years leading up to his publication of *Silence*, Endō's construction of monotheism was one which struggled with Japan at the level of cultural and psychological compatibility, and he strongly insisted on the presence of an essentialized Japanese 'mind', 'sensitivity', 'sensibility', and 'culture' which is inherently 'insensitive to God' (Endō 1963:306; cf. Mase-Hasegawa 2008:65-66). The Japanese people 'think and live in the land of gods', and to be Catholic (or to be a monotheist) is to rid oneself of the belief in myriad spiritual beings; thus 'the Japanese and westerners cannot really understand each other's cultures. The Japanese cannot understand Christianity in western terms' (Mase-Hasegawa 2008:64). Clearly, on this assumption that monotheism cannot take root in the swamp of Japan, Endō's question inexorably looms: 'How can someone Japanese be a Christian?' (Mase-Hasegawa 2008:70), and so too has the question of historians, '[H]ow "Christian" were the underground Christians in 1873, when their persecution officially ended?' (Nosco 1993:4; cf. also Higashibaba 2001:xv; Morris 2018).

Some further reinforcement of this image of theological incompatibility or non-comprehension has been achieved by portraits of the Japanese Christianities emerging in the period after Western missionaries returned to Japan in the 1860s, a time when the reluctance of most Protestant denominations to inculturate resulted in a deepened sense of the 'isolation' of Christian theology from Japanese culture (cf. Yuki Hideo in Swyngedouw 1983:18-19). For example, the English-language *Japan Weekly Mail* announced at the turn of the century that 'there are few countries in the world where Christianity has been propagated that can show a bigger crop of what the Orthodox call heresy than Japan' (Japan Weekly Mail 1902:264). Contemporary Japanese scholars of Christianity have also treated the situation of Christian monotheism (and the Trinity) in Japan during this period as an intellectual problem (cf. Fukai 2010).

Indeed, many Meiji-era Christian leaders, especially unitarian theologians, continue to be portrayed as having 'misunderstood' the Trinity, or even as being unwilling to understand concepts with which they could form no cultural connection (Iwai 2009:30; Ion 1990:152; cf. also my response to these specific claims in Chandler 2021). Some Japanese theologians have ultimately insisted on a necessary reconstruction or reformulation of the 'Western' doctrine of the Trinity in light of a 'Japanese cultural context' in order to make it congenial to 'a Japanese mindset' (cf. Miyahira 2000:2, 4). Likewise, the 'mind' of the *Kakure Kirishitan*, it is widely assumed, could

only have missed these basic points of Christian doctrine, since monotheism and trinitarianism were simply ideas which, in the words of Christal Whelan, had ‘no cultural bedrock on which to rest in Japan. [It is the very c]oncepts introduced to them, such as the Trinity, [which were] either never fully digested or they resisted understanding what did not appeal or seem relevant to them’ (Whelan 1996:33). Changes made to the Jesuit doctrine of God ‘show interference from the Japanese mindset, or “mudswamp” as Endo calls it’ (Dougill 2012:169). Higashibaba summarizes that because of their doctrinal situation, early Japanese expressions of Christianity have often been evaluated by scholars as ‘secondary or unimportant’, ‘false’, ‘less serious’, or ‘worse’ than other expressions (Higashibaba 2001:xv-xvi).

It is not my intention in this article to suggest that the *Kakure Kirishitan* were in fact ‘orthodox’ in their readings of Catholic doctrine, nor that there were absolutely no intellectual difficulties with the concept of monotheism among any of the Japanese of the early modern period. Rather, this article aims to provide a warning to scholars about the subtle and even subconscious ways in which an ‘Orientalizing’ tendency may persist despite the present and wide-ranging awareness of the misleading effect of essentializing dichotomies. I suggest that a significant number of modern commentaries on the *Kakure Kirishitan* and their relation with monotheism ultimately reveal an intuitive Orientalizing impulse towards the abstraction of an inauthentic or compromised Christianity of early modern Japan against that of a more genuine and more faithfully Christian West.

Routine treatment of *Kakure* interpretations of monotheism, the doctrine of the Trinity, and certain worship practices as ‘polytheistic’ and as relatively unique or serious misunderstandings or abrogations of both Christian theology and the very concept of monotheism, represent a constructed image of a theologically struggling Japan which necessarily conjures a non-Japanese Other that is more authentically or quintessentially monotheistic, Trinitarian, or Christian. Such an East-West dichotomy will only be problematic insofar as it is untrue – a problematization justified, I suggest, by the data below, which in the end betrays an *a priori* separation of ‘Japanese’ and ‘Western’ religions and raises the question as to whether analysts operating in the post-colonial era, who may or may not subscribe to explicitly post-colonial frameworks, have yet to become fully aware of the basic warning of Said’s *Orientalism* – a still-timely message which is not, as some seem to believe,

centered on the errors of a specifically Western hegemony, but on the dangers of otherizing in general as a form of devaluation (cf. Levinson 2013:20).

Kakure Kirishitan and Anti-Christian Writers on Christian Monotheism

I will briefly raise two historical items which cast doubt on the widespread ruling that Japanese Christians in the early modern period, and Japanese people in general, simply could not understand Christian monotheism.

Higashibaba Ikuo, pointing to *Kirishitan* confessional literature, highlights the testimony of a Japanese *Kirishitan* who not only describes his own faith in the 'one body' (*go-ittai*) of Deus, but also testifies to the fact that 'even gentiles' (Japanese non-Christians) know the single body of Deus (Higashibaba 2001:94-95). Thus, as Higashibaba concludes, '[t]he monotheistic character of Deus…was easy for the Japanese follower to comprehend' (Higashibaba 2001:95). He points to singular divine figures like Amida for further evidence that a 'teaching of a single divinity was not uncommon in Japanese religious thought' (Higashibaba 2001:89), and he ultimately insists that it was not monotheism *per se* which was incompatible with the Japanese mind; rather, 'when a monotheism demanded exclusive adherence to its own practice, completely negating all other religious practices, as the Kirishitan doctrine did, it was unique and potentially conflictive in Japan' (Higashibaba 2001:89). We must understand that 'monotheism did not necessarily equal monopraxis in Japanese religious thought' (Higashibaba 2001:89). As Higashibaba notes elsewhere, it is certain that the Japanese people's 'pre-Christian religious experience played a large role' in their reception of Catholic theology, and whenever they were presented with either 'familiar or foreign elements, we may assume that the Japanese could recognize and understand them through conscious or unconscious comparison of those elements with their counterparts in Japanese religion' (Higashibaba [1999] 2015:78; cf. 75-89).

Support for the existence of a 'pre-Christian religious experience' which prepared Japan for monotheism can be drawn from the testimony of one of the most well-known anti-Christian writers of the period, and a former *Kirishitan* himself, Fabian Fukan (ca. 1565-1621). Fukan's anti-Christian writings exemplify a genre of government-backed literature which sought to

homogenize Japanese traditions and deploy them in the suppression of Western influence. Here, certain religious and social ideas were abstracted and decried as uniquely 'Western', and as the products of a '"barbarian" religion inherently opposed to "Eastern", "Japanese", "civilized" ethical and religious systems' (Paramore 2009:5). Interestingly, the dichotomous nature of this discourse, based on 'an imagined, constructed conflict between images of "Japaneseness" and "non-Japaneseness"' (Paramore 2009:11), subsequently reverberated into modern Western representations of the period (Paramore 2009:5, 11). What is most interesting for our purposes, however, is the fact that, according to Fukan, the concept of monotheism, i.e., the belief in a supreme god who was in some sense responsible for the generation of the cosmos, was *not* among the purported Western importations which allegedly conflicted with the Japanese religious world.

In his *Ha Daiuso* (*Deus destroyed*), written in 1620, Fukan confronts Christian monotheism not by pointing to its inherent foreignness or incompatibility with the 'Japanese' worldview; his tactic is to challenge Christianity's claims to originality on this point. He writes: 'What is so amazing about all this? What schools fail to discuss this?' He cites the Zen logion that '[t]here was something before heaven and earth…it [emptiness] acts as the lord of the myriad phenomena' (Fukan quoted in Elison [1973] 1991:464). He also quotes from a Confucian text in which 'heaven' is the origin of life (cf. Fukan quoted in Elison [1973] 1991:262). While both the Buddhist emptiness and the Confucian heaven cited here are impersonal ultimate principles and not personal gods, Fukan subsequently points out that in Shinto, the first of the heavenly *kami* is *Kunitokotachi-no-Mikoto*, a great deity who, with the assistance of two other (created? subordinate?) *kami*, was the one 'who opened up heaven and earth' (Fukan quoted in Elison [1973] 1991:262).

Fukan clearly has the text of the *Nihon shoki* in mind and the interpretation of the powerful Yoshida school of Shinto which forefronted *Kunitokotachi-no-Mikoto* as the primordial god of 'Ultimate Origin' (*Daigen sonjin*)[7]. For Yoshida Kanetomo (1435-1511), this deity was the 'fundamental god of the universe' standing at the center of the cosmos (Hardacre 2017:220;

[7] The fact that Fukan has the Yoshida's tradition of a Shinto creator *kami* in mind is evident in light of his discussion of the Yoshida interpretation in his earlier pro-Christian writing (cf. his *Myōtei Dialogues*, second fascicle; Baskind & Bowring 2016:147-164).

Endō [1998] 2003:112), the 'supreme deity' (Baskind & Bowring 2016:163, no. 50), and 'the great progenitor' of all *kami* and humans (Bowring 2017:67; 2005:421). Armed with this example, Fukan unleashes the rest of his attack on Christian claims of uniqueness: 'Why then do the adherents of Deus press their tedious claims with the pretense that they alone know the lord who opened heaven and earth? Idle verbosity without substance, and most annoying!' (Fukan quoted in Elison [1973] 1991:262). He concludes his attack as follows:

> But let us go no further, let us take up the example of Kuni-tokotachi no Mikoto. How could you ever say he is a mere human, he who was a god before even one human existed, before heaven and earth were opened up! Don't dare say it, don't dare say it! Accept as understood the things you can understand, admit you do not fathom the things you cannot fathom' (Fukan quoted in Elison [1973] 1991:263; cf. also Paramore 2009:46).

Fukan would doubtless argue with the same fervor against those modern scholars who, like the Jesuit missionaries, have insisted on monotheism as a unique property of the Christian West, as something foreign to or incompatible with an allegedly homogenous Japanese worldview or, even worse, as something unable to be comprehended by the Japanese people. In my view, it is unproductive to declare that the Japanese simply could not understand Christian theology (since it is clear that at least some Japanese could comprehend monotheism), and it is more helpful to point out that many Japanese simply disagreed with certain aspects of it, e.g., the Catholic doctrine of a *transcendent* monotheistic God, and Catholic exclusivism (cf. also Higashibaba 2001:88-90). A failure to accept is not necessarily a failure to comprehend.

Ultimately, descriptions of a Japanese non-comprehension of monotheism featuring appeals to 'the Japanese mind' or to divergent 'cultural bedrocks' verge on a culturalist approach to the interaction between Japan and Christianity in this period, in which intellectual histories draw up compartmentalized images of a 'clash' between essentialized 'Western' and 'Eastern' cultures (cf. Paramore 2009:4-5). While it is true that contemporary Western scholarship on Japanese Christianity has largely departed from narrating 'the flow of history as a determined function of an essentialized conception of

"culture"' (Paramore 2009:5), I suggest that the ongoing treatment of the basic concept of monotheism as flatly uncongenial to Japan's 'cultural bed-rock' may be among the most stubborn remnants of such a culturalist reading in Western analysis.

Spiritual Beings and the Limits of Monotheism

The routine descriptions of *Kakure Kirishitan* theology as 'polytheistic' or 'not monotheistic' has been explicitly predicated on the *Kakure* acknowledgement and veneration of more than one spiritual entity (e.g., ancestors, *kami*, or divinized ritual objects). John Dougill describes *Kakure* teaching as 'polytheistic, syncretic and this-worldly, rooted in reverence for ancestors and emphasizing ritual over doctrine', and he insists that '[a]s such, it's at odds with a monotheistic dogma like Christianity' (Dougill 2012:223).

Dorothea Filus, after her extensive fieldwork, concluded that 16th-century Catholicism was 'most likely not conceived of as monotheistic by the Japanese', pointing to the fact that even now in *Kakure* communities, 'Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the saints, the Japanese martyrs, and one's distant ancestors (those who died long ago) are all venerated as kami' (Filus 2009:18). Japanese scholars have likewise concluded that in the *Kakure* acknowledgement of more than one spiritual being, 'there is no trace of a Christian monotheistic worldview, but it reveals that a very Japanese and deep-rooted concept of spiritual beings continues to exist' (Miyazaki 2003:31). Quite clearly, *Kakure* theology is problematized as non-monotheistic or non-Christian on an assumption of a definition of monotheism in which only a single spiritual/divine being exists (cf. Ebisawa 1966:119; Kobori 1986:7). In Western studies such as Stephen Turnbull's well-known 1998 account of *Kakure* beliefs, *Kakure* theology is again characterized as having a 'polytheistic nature' (Turnbull 1998:212). Such conclusions reflect, I suggest, a too-narrow and ultimately arbitrary definition of monotheism, and in at least some cases are reflective also of a subtle, Orientalizing approach.

For the sake of space, I will only consider Turnbull's account more closely in this regard (a study which remains as valuable as it is comprehensive despite the forthcoming critique). Turnbull focuses his interpretation on 'to whom' the *Kakure* are praying in their *kamiyose* prayers (prayers to summon the *kami*) (Turnbull 1998:149), and thus concludes, in light of the fact

that other entities are acknowledged other than the one god, that *Kakure* theology stretches 'beyond' the limits of 'the definition of monotheism' (Turnbull 1998:149, 153). He does recognize some relationship between Catholicism's devotion to saints, relics, holy water, and holy images. However, he describes these as merely 'polytheistic tendencies of popular Catholicism' (Turnbull 1998:109). Meanwhile, he problematizes the *Kakure* recognition of these heavenly figures as *kami* and the incorporation of pre-existing Shinto *kami*, and also sacred objects or *gozensama* (*honorable presence*) as *kami* – all of which produce an 'enlarged' or a 'huge pantheon of *kamisama*' which could be prayed to with 'a wide range of intentions' (Turnbull 1998:136; cf. 85, 149, 155). Thus, in Turnbull's view, the *Kakure* faith is not monotheistic, and neither is it a monotheism which has merely drifted toward unorthodox 'tendencies'; it rather has decidedly assumed a flatly 'polytheistic nature' (Turnbull 1998:212). *Kakure* beliefs and practices, he states, stretch any derivation from similar Catholic tradition to its 'breaking point' (Turnbull 1998: 109), pushing their theology clearly 'beyond [the] definition of monotheism' (Turnbull 1998:153).

However, what is the justification for the uneven application of this (narrow) definition of monotheism? In traditions like Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy we encounter a host of spiritual entities including demons, angels, the Virgin Mary, and Satan, also the supplication and even iconographic veneration of a multiplicity of spiritual or heavenly powers in the form of saints. While these kinds of elements are understood to immediately disqualify both the *Kakure* and Japanese religions in general from the category of monotheism, this is for some reason not the case for Catholic or Orthodox traditions. Again, on what basis are Catholic veneration practices declared mere polytheistic 'tendencies' while *Kakure* practices are so thoroughly destructive of monotheism that it renders them both 'polytheists' and 'not Christian' (Turnbull 1998:225)? For Turnbull, it is ultimately 'the Kakure's inclusion of non-Christian deities' and objects of veneration which 'stretch[es monotheism] to its limits and beyond' (Turnbull 1998:153). Apparently, if the *Kakure* had limited their worship to Western Christian figures, they might have remained monotheists. It is therefore monotheism's contact with Japan which is thought to immediately destroy monotheism, or to utilize Endō's imagery, to swallow it up.

In this light, we must ask whether or not the Christian West is called 'monotheistic' because of a tradition which simply declares that this is so

rather than a principled application of a scholarly category? Gesturing at 'Japanese' religious traits like ancestor veneration, many spiritual beings, or the use of icons as clear evidence of their 'polytheism' actually seem like a post-factum justification for an *a priori* separation of 'Eastern' and 'Western' religions – in other words, the very 'predetermined ontological and epistemological separation' Edward Said decried (cf. Said 1979:2, 30-40).

An Especially Heretical Tendency?

Has early modern Japanese Christianity demonstrated an especially deviant, creative, or heretical tendency in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity over and against Western Christendom? It is clear that the *Kakure Kirishitan* did not maintain an 'orthodox' Trinitarian image, i.e., they did not ultimately affirm that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three co-eternal, co-equal, and consubstantial Persons in one substance. Certainly the scarcity of evidence disallows a solid general picture of their beliefs, yet there appears to have been some Japanese *Kirishitan* who, rather than automatically and inevitably transforming the doctrine, at least initially received an 'orthodox' understanding of the Trinity. One *Kirishitan* confession to a padre acknowledges on the one hand the 'one body' of Deus (again, something 'even gentiles' understand) (Higashibaba 2001:94-95). He additionally agrees that 'Deus is in three as you said…When they say "three", they mean the *persona* of Deus, but when they say "one body", they mean the *divinidade* of Deus, his divine body. All the Kirishitan know that' (Higashibaba 2001:94).

It is true that at some point, according to the versions of the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* in our possession, many or most Japanese Christians came to believe in the temporal generation of the Son; they exchanged the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; and ultimately came to conceive of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Mary as one of three distinct beings who possess divine 'bodies' (forms implied to be fundamentally related in some way). Nevertheless, embedded in this latter teaching is a *Kakure* attempt to preserve the Trinity – an effort as earnest as it is unsuccessful. The one god continues to be called *Tenteisantai* (*the heaven emperor in three bodies*) and they insist, 'even if God is called three bodies, yet there is only one body' (Kamstra 1994:115). In the end, despite the temporal division of the Father's body into other entities, *Kakure* theology remains monotheistic: The one De-

us is the Father, the original 'Lord of Heaven and Earth, and Parent of humankind and all creation' (Whelan 1996:39), including the myriad spiritual beings. The question is as to whether or not their *Trinitarian* creativity (which in addition to its lofty elevation of Mary manifests in a subordinationist, unitarian relationship between the members of the triad), is a trait on which we can ground perceptions of a *Kakure* heretical uniqueness.

Against such a view, recent surveys of Western Christians have demonstrated a long-known secret among theologians, namely that the majority of Western Christians are woefully confused (or perhaps deliberately creative) in their own interpretations of the Trinitarian doctrine. A 2022 survey of American Evangelicals reveals that despite having a reputation for relatively high doctrinal concern, this sizeable and globally-influential Western Christian population boasts a similar level of theological confusion and/or creativity as the *Kakure Kirishitan*. 73 percent of those surveyed believe that Jesus is *not* the co-equal, co-eternal second member of the Trinity, but 'the first and greatest being created by God' (McDade 2022). 43 percent of American Evangelicals agree with the statement that Jesus is 'not God', and 60 percent deny that the Holy Spirit is a third, co-equal Person of the Trinity, instead affirming that the Holy Spirit is 'a force but is not a personal being' (McDade 2022). In other words, the large majority are not Trinitarians at all but are subordinationists (unitarians) of the so-called 'Arian' variety, an interpretation strongly condemned as heretical (and almost always as damnable) by the vast majority of Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and even 'non-denominational' faith statements. Thus, the majority are as deviant, creative, or heretical when it comes to the Trinity as the *Kakure Kirishitan*. Both the *Kakure* and the majority of Evangelicals separate the Father and Son as two distinct beings and also exchange the Holy Spirit for someone or something else (Mary or an impersonal force respectively). This widespread discrepancy with Orthodox models among American Christians is by no means a recent phenomenon as earlier surveys have demonstrated similar results (e.g., Emmert 2014). While further survey data are lacking at present, this unorthodox pattern with regard to the Trinity can almost certainly be extrapolated to other Christian groups in other Western contexts, unless we imagine there is some-

thing uniquely heretical about both Japan and America (!), and also to other purportedly vital doctrines of Christianity[8].

The question can be briefly raised as to why both early modern Japanese and Western forms of Christianity, if not struggling from an acutely 'cultural' standpoint, have often failed to accept or maintain orthodox trinitarianism. Simply put, this is not a problem with the 'mindset' of any particular group of people, it rather is a problem with the orthodox formulation of the doctrine itself. It is a (deliberately?) unsung fact in the world of Christian theology that there is no single 'doctrine of the Trinity'. Instead, there are doctrines (plural) which, though officially affirming the same creedal language, each entertain radically divergent meanings for that language (e.g., one-self Trinity theories vs. social trinitarianism vs. four-self, no-self, and indeterminate self-theories, negative vs. positive mysterianism, etc. – cf. Tuggy 2020). Furthermore, the Trinity is positively affirmed to be a divine mystery across both Christian history and the contemporary denominational spectrum. The early 5th-century Athanasian Creed (ca. 500) declares the Father, Son, and Spirit to be 'incomprehensible', as the 'incomprehensibility', 'unintelligibility', and even 'contradictory' nature of the Trinity and orthodox Christology continue to be affirmed by modern Western theologians from all denominational backgrounds (e.g., Erickson 1998:363; Ryrie 1999: 61; Hey 2013:235; Beall 2021; Ware [1979] 1995:31).

Roman Catholic theologians commenting on the *Kakure Kirishitan*, for example Diego Yuuki of Nagasaki, have lamented the fact that the 'meaning of the Trinity is lost on them' (Yuuki quoted in Takao 2018:32). However, neither the *Kakure* nor Japan in general are special in this regard. As I have noted elsewhere,

> If Japanese rejection of the Trinity, as a unique cultural phenomenon, is to be reduced to a byproduct of misunderstanding, it will need to be determined in what ways these [Japanese] Christians have misunderstood the Trinity, and how this misunderstanding differs from other global contexts which have likewise struggled with this basic doctrine (Chandler 2021:115).

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8 One example from the BBC in 2017 demonstrates that a quarter of self-professed Christians in the United Kingdom do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus (BBC 2017).

In the end, the history of the doctrine of the Trinity itself should prevent culturalist portraits of Japanese deviance.

There is not space enough to engage properly with the many charges of 'syncretism' which have been leveled at the *Kakure Kirishitan* – a task involving the protracted debate over the meaning and value of syncretism itself as an analytical category (cf. Leopold & Jensen [2004] 2014). Presently I will only draw attention to and raise questions about the absence of any mentions of syncretism in regard to the 'orthodox' Christianity implied to be represented in the Western world in scholarly contrasts with early Japanese Christianity. For many commentators, the 'obvious syncretic nature of Kakure Kirishitan' separates them from the Catholicism inherited from the West and casts doubt on their legitimacy as 'Christians' (Fujimura 2016:99; cf. Furuno 1959:110; Turnbull 1998:224-225). Dougill more explicitly dichotomizes these 'syncretistic' and 'pure' Christianities when he speaks of a 'European' Christianity which was 'compromised' in Japan by a distinctly 'Japanese' instinct toward syncretism, a Japanese 'default mode' which resumed after the expulsion of the Western missionaries whose 'European instruction' had kept such indigenous instincts at bay (Dougill 2012:167-168).

Christianity, according to Dougill, is the 'European religion', while *Kakure* syncretism amounts to a 'Japanization' of this religion (Dougill 2012: 168). Similarly, Kamstra flatly characterizes 'Christianity' as a monolithic religion which is inherently opposed to the 'syncretistic tendencies' which belong to Japan's 'oldest mentality'; it is 'a religion which is Western, un-Japanese, not adapted to the local situation, far too highly based on speculation and relying too much on large and expensive institutions', and this religion 'contrasts sharply with a group of indigenous religions which have built themselves entirely on the Japanese national outlook' (Kamstra 1967:2-4).

However, most historians, scholars of religion, and particularly postcolonialists, have long been aware that Christianity has 'been from its earliest years a religion of accretion…which thrived on the absorption of other practices and cultural modes' and which 'continued to change as it encountered the cultures of the colonized' (Ashcroft *et al*. [2000] 2007:187-188). As Turnbull keenly reveals, even the Jesuit missionaries themselves, when transporting Catholic 'orthodoxy' into Japan, 'were not above using apocryphal and non-canonical material to spread the Gospel', and 'many of the supposed Japanese additions can be shown to have been deliberately introduced by Jesuit missionaries before persecution began' (Turnbull 1996:71). Turnbull fur-

thermore rightly asks if those obviously Japanese sections of the *Tenchi* 'could also have been added by the missionaries as a way of making the Christian message more acceptable to their Japanese converts?' (Turnbull 1996:71). Indeed, 'syncretism' was regarded by the Jesuits as a 'means to expand their mission', and Francis Xavier (1506-1552) himself 'adapt[ed] Christianity to Japanese culture' in order to convert Japanese leaders (Leopold & Jensen [2004] 2014:16; cf. also Turnbull 1998:218, 223-227)[9].

Ultimately, if 'syncretism' is defined as 'phenomena of religious mixture, as in religious traditions mixing with surrounding cultures or other religious traditions', then '[s]yncretism has thus been an aspect of Christianity all along' (Kane 2021:2). On the other hand, if 'syncretism' is merely a 'theoretical invention' (Pakkanen 1996:86) with 'no taxonomic value' (Droge 2001:376), and if this term ends up referring to something basic to both the invention of religious traditions (cf. Shaw & Stewart 1994:1-2; Van der Veer 1994:208) and to 'the predicament of culture' in general (cf. Clifford 1988:14-15), then we are even less compelled to frame *Kakure* theology in such terms in contrast with Western Christianity. Is not the asymmetrical application of 'syncretism' in contrast between early Japanese Christianity and Western Christendom further evidence of the oversized influence of 'orthodox' theology in comparative projects – an unwitting participation in the efforts of Christian theologians to separate 'syncretism' from divinely-inspired religion as an essentially secular category and then to project a crime of illegitimate mingling onto every person or group beyond their theological domain in order to 'protect the category of divine revelation from perceived human interference' (Shaw & Stewart 1994:3)?

A Final Warning About Categories and 'Orthodoxy'

As suggested above, misleading descriptions of the theology of the *Kakure Kirishitan* are not only supported by an underlying and Orientalizing tendency to separate 'Japanese' and 'Western' religions, they are also the result of

[9] Turnbull does not imagine a 'conscious' rejection of Christianity among the *Kakure* by way of syncretism. Nevertheless, the incorporation of certain 'concepts from Japanese religion' results in a loss of the Person of Christ and 'a gulf between the Kakure and any definition of Christianity that is likely to be accepted' (Turnbull 1998:225).

inadequate scholarly categories and definitions. The construction of the aforementioned narrow definitions of monotheism, in which only one divine being exists and/or only one such entity can be worshiped, appears to have been overly informed by 'orthodox' or 'mainline' Christian theologians, thinkers for whom 'the divine nature' is regularly limited in its worldly presence and is often contained to a transcendent deity beyond the world of humankind, and thinkers for whom 'worship' is often understood to be a particular act deserved only by God (a singular being with exclusive possession of 'the divine nature').

Great care must also be taken with the application of categories like 'Orthodoxy' and 'heresy', especially when dealing with marginalized religious groups like the *Kakure Kirishitan*, since the dominant religious institutions of society will often exclude minority groups via the promotion of whitewashed historical and theological narratives which characterize theirs as the most faithful or genuine expression of a particular religious tradition above all others. Indeed, institutional apologetics will often project a doctrinal homogeneity or serenity which bolsters their programmatic otherizing of theological rivals but which fails to correspond to the reality of the theological landscape. The use of a sharp contrast between an 'Orthodox' Western Christendom and an especially 'heterodox' early Japanese Christianity may demonstrate the influence of partisan theological narratives which seek to homogenize or downplay doctrinal diversity in 'orthodox' contexts in order to separate certain groups as mainstream or fringe, or primary or auxiliary in the broader tradition. A similar process is detectable with presentations of 'pure' or theologically 'faithful' traditions in contrast with 'syncretistic' or theologically 'compromising' expressions of particular religions.

Ultimately, regardless of how effective we imagine 'orthodox' institutions and apologetics have been in the scholarly construction of allegedly neutral, 'secular', or post-colonial terms of engagement, it should be easy to recognize how tightly both the aforementioned attempts at theological whitewashing and Orientalizing processes in the study of religions have played hand-in-hand in the separation of religions into compartmentalized units, discrete entities which only cross one another at great peril to both the integrity of their presupposed essential qualities and the partisan narratives that create them.

Conclusion

Brett Levinson once encapsulated Said's *Orientalism* as a project which warns about 'othering as a form of devaluation', cautioning scholars that 'non-Western sites are objected the moment they are Othered' (Levinson 2013:20). Since differences between cultures are real and are often the energizing force behind the speciation of religions (e.g., Christianities within Christianity), we must recognize that religions are not free-floating entities. Because all religions are at least at some level the byproduct of particular cultural situations, the otherizing of religions easily becomes a backdoor for the otherizing of cultures, and *vice versa*.

Ultimately, while Orientalism *qua* Orientalism has been relatively easy to isolate, denigrate, and dismiss, Orientalism as a dichotomizing pattern of engagement which presupposes an epistemological distinction between 'East' and 'West', as I suggest has been the case in some studies of the present subject, has been more difficult to detect. In addition to problematic definitions which sometimes betray an inordinate theological influence, part of the visibility problem, I suggest, has been our assumptions about our place on an allegedly 'post-' side of the history of colonialism.

Scholars of religion in general, and especially those operating from deliberately post-colonial vantage points, must be careful to avoid culturally bifurcated lenses which necessarily distort our sense of what it is that religions are actually up to. Add an earnest concern for the 'political' dimensions of religions and cross-cultural religious exchange, and it is not difficult to understand how for some scholars 'colonialism' itself has come to significantly involve or even amount to the historical imposition of the concept of monotheism on subaltern cultures by a specifically Western, hegemonic interest. From this critical vantage point, applications of various post-colonial theories in the study of religions, perhaps marketed as principled and neutralized critiques of 'Western' modes of inquiry, can quickly become ciphers for the programmatic inversion of the 'colonialist' project, i.e., the *extraction* of monotheism from subaltern contexts. However, the particularization of Japanese culture, language, and religion which has continued to exist in both nationalistic Japanese and post-colonial discourse is, as Ueno points out, something that European Orientalists imposed on the East in the first place (Ueno 2005:234-235). A significant number of comments on Japan's early Christian monotheism, despite their advantageous position in the history of scholarship,

thus only seem to reinforce the need for Lyotard's warning about the prefix 'post-', that it can signal a feigned fracture with and reiteration of an unwanted past (Lyotard 1992:90).

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