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# Mother of God, Mother of Christianity: The Development of the Marian Tradition in Early Modern Japan

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# Mother of God, Mother of Christianity: The Development of the Marian Tradition in Early Modern Japan

## **Abstract**

The Christian figure of the Virgin Mary, first introduced as Jesus' mother in the Bible, has since been repeatedly reinterpreted in various roles and imagery through her incorporation into different cultures. This project analyses the historical adoption and adaptation of Mary among Christian converts in Japan, from the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1549 to the end of the Tokugawa era in the nineteenth century. An examination of doctrinal prayers, the rosary, and Marian iconography within Japan illustrates Mary's role as the Mother of God and compassionate intercessor for early Japanese Christians. Moreover, their affinity for Mary enabled Christianity to endure centuries of religious oppression under the Tokugawa shogunate as the hidden believers accommodated Mary within preexisting Buddhist traditions and Japanese customs. In studying the primacy of Mary and her roles within Japanese Christianity, this research explains a main reason behind the religion's survival in early modern Japan.

## **Keywords**

Japan, Christianity, Japanese Christianity, Mary, Mother of God

## **Disciplines**

Catholic Studies | Japanese Studies | Religion

## **Comments**

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# Mother of God, Mother of Christianity

The Development of the Marian Tradition in Early Modern Japan

The Christian figure of the Virgin Mary, first introduced as Jesus' mother in the Bible, has since been repeatedly reinterpreted in various roles and imagery through her incorporation into different cultures. This project analyses the historical adoption and adaptation of Mary among Christian converts in Japan, from the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1549 to the end of the Tokugawa era in the nineteenth century. An examination of doctrinal prayers, the rosary, and Marian iconography within Japan illustrates Mary's role as the Mother of God and compassionate intercessor for early Japanese Christians. Moreover, their affinity for Mary enabled Christianity to endure centuries of religious oppression under the Tokugawa shogunate as the hidden believers accommodated Mary within preexisting Buddhist traditions and Japanese customs. In studying the primacy of Mary and her roles within Japanese Christianity, this research explains a main reason behind the religion's survival in early modern Japan.

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When Francis Xavier and fellow Jesuit missionaries first introduced Christianity to Japan in 1549, few could have foreseen that, a century later, any visible trace of Christianity would have disappeared from Japanese society. Cosme de Torres, a Spanish Jesuit priest on this earliest mission, recorded that “These Japanese are better disposed to embrace our holy Faith than any other people in the world”; however, while the missionaries remained convinced that Christianity would easily spread throughout the country, Japanese leaders grew increasingly threatened by its foreign monotheistic beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Following the onset of the Tokugawa period in 1600, increasing regulations and persecution eventually forced believers into hiding, where they continued to practice Christianity until 1865, more than a decade after Commodore Perry’s marked entrance into Tokyo Bay that abruptly ended the Japanese *sakoku* policy of seclusion. Rumors of these ‘hidden Christians’ circulated among new missionaries, who were eager to complete the evangelization that had begun centuries earlier, yet attempts to contact the community initially remained fruitless. According to the traditional narrative of the “discovery” of these hidden Christians, only on March 17, 1865, did fifteen Japanese Christians, descendants of the original converts, approach a French priest in Nagasaki and reveal their faith. Three women in the group, beyond sharing their secret with the priest, Bernard Petitjean, proceeded to kneel and inquire: “Where is the statue of Maria-sama?”<sup>2</sup>

Rather than calling upon the name of God or Jesus, the divine individual to whom Christian faith attributes the salvation of mankind, this “Maria-sama” figure refers to Mary, Jesus’ human mother. The women’s acknowledgement of Mary, then, not only reaffirms the hidden Christians’ identities as the descendants of those taught by Jesuit missionaries but also

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543-1640* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1995), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Christina Whelan, annot. and trans., *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan’s Hidden Christians* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), 12-13.

indicates a certain affinity for Mary among the hidden Christians. Still, as Mary's character within the Bible receives little introduction and remains heavily reliant upon her capacity as the mother of Jesus, the specific appeal of the Marian figure over that of Jesus warrants exploration. Mary's primacy in the minds of the Japanese faithful, especially after generations of secrecy and oppression, prompts further examination of hidden Christian traditions. This work asserts that an evolving, yet powerful, Marian tradition enabled Christianity to exist in Japan from its Jesuit beginnings to the 'rediscovery' of an adapted Christian faith after the arrival of Commodore Perry and his fleet of black ships.

Jesuit teaching established the foundation for Mary's extensive role within the hidden Christian community through prayer and iconography, yet with only one hundred forty-two priests at the height of missionary activity in Japan, these Marian teachings melded with common beliefs.<sup>3</sup> The growing Japanese laity, often disengaged from priestly influence, ascribed to Mary traits from other Japanese religions, such as Buddhism, as they interpreted and propagated the foreign doctrine. This melding of Christian icons within Japanese tradition then allowed Christianity to endure, unrecognizable to Tokugawa authorities, through the proscription that lasted through most of the nineteenth century.

Within this narrative of Christianity in Japanese history, two lines of analysis emerge among researchers: the primacy of Mary among the hidden Christians and the perseverance of their beliefs through intense oppression. Many studies of early Japanese Christianity focus on these two themes independently, as concurrent yet distinct avenues of research. Examining the hidden Christians' question "Where is the statue of Maria-sama?" engenders a new perspective that counters the separation of Mary and Christian history. The Japanese women's explicit

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<sup>3</sup> Junhyoung Michael Shin, "Avalokitesvara's Manifestation as the Virgin Mary: The Jesuit Adaptation and the Visual Conflation in Japanese Catholicism after 1614," *Church History* 80, no. 1 (March 2011): 6.

request for Mary not only implies her distinct role among the lingering faithful but, in being the first request of Christians after centuries of secrecy, also suggests that she served as a principle reason behind the religion's survival until 1865.

Though not directly crediting Mary with promoting Christianity's continual existence, a significant amount of research exists that discusses her adoption by and adaptation among the Japanese, the first line of analysis. Stephen Turnbull, a prolific writer on the hidden Christians, tackles the question of Mary's 'adoption' in Japan and the reason behind her dominant role in the community. The comprehensive Marian tradition establishes her as a revered mother figure, yet Turnbull's analysis of the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto (THK)*, a nineteenth-century compilation of oral Biblical stories from the hidden Christians, and the history of persecution indicates that Japanese Christians sought Mary's accessible intercession in addition to her role as mother.<sup>4</sup> Higashibaba Ikuo also mentions Mary as intercessor and mother in his discussion of early Christian prayers and their use in teaching doctrine to the Japanese. The *Ave Maria* prayer, in particular, names Mary as "Mother of God" before continuing with an appeal for intercession on behalf of sinners; the ease of connection to Mary through this prayer, taught in Latin and Japanese, only increased Mary's prevalence within the community while its repetition maintained her prominence.<sup>5</sup>

Research on the gradual blending of Jesuit teachings and Japanese customs is also plentiful. Several works focus heavily on Marian iconography to demonstrate the changing visual culture of Christianity during Tokugawa persecution. While Junhyoung Michael Shin's argument fails to emphasize Mary's role in preserving religious tradition, his use of the *THK*, small figurines, and the rosary illustrate the re-fashioned Marian tradition, one enmeshed in Pure

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Turnbull, "Devotion to Mary Among the Hidden Christians of Japan," paper presented to the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the Society at Aylesford, October 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Ikuo Higashibaba, "Christian Prayer in Tokugawa Japan," *Tenri Journal of Religion* 34 (2006): 107-117.

Land Buddhism, that hidden Christians revealed to Father Petitjean in 1865.<sup>6</sup> Naoko Frances Hiroki and Wakakuwa Midori both extend this conversation of Mary's changing depiction by including periods of imported Western imagery and domestic paintings within Jesuit schools, further tracing the Christian adaptation of Pure Land Buddhist imagery in Marian figurines. The resultant figure of Maria-Kannon, in preserving Marian tradition by concealing Mary in the bodhisattva Kannon, both encouraged devotion to Mary and ensured that Christianity could remain secret during the Tokugawa ban.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Jesuit missionaries' introduction of Christianity to Japan in the sixteenth century marked the nation's first widespread encounter with these foreign beliefs and hallowed figures, European state and religious leaders alike had been cultivating the Marian tradition for over a millennium. Despite her absence in many stories in the Biblical narrative of salvation history, Jesus' elusive mother soon developed her own distinctive persona as a result of the attribution of folk stories, invocations, and exemplary roles to her, beginning as early as 150 A.D. with an apocryphal chronicle of Mary's life in the *Protogospel of James*.<sup>8</sup> The collection of these surrounding beliefs thus constructed the Marian tradition that Jesuits sought to spread alongside the foundational doctrine of the Christian faith.

At the time of Xavier's arrival in 1549, Japan struggled amid civil war within its various provinces, and the chaos of this *Sengoku* period eliminated possible opposition from a central authority to the missionaries' early presence.<sup>9</sup> This power vacuum soon vanished with the rise of

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<sup>6</sup> Shin, "Avalokitesvara's Manifestation," 1-39.

<sup>7</sup> Naoko Frances Hiroki, "Deconstructing Maria Kannon: A New Look at the Marian Images for Urakami Crypto Christians, ca. 1860," *Japanese Religions* 40, no. 1-2 (2015): 25-43; Midori Wakakuwa, "Iconography of the Virgin Mary in Japan and Its Transformation: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture and *Maria Kannon*," in *Christianity and Cultures: Japan and China in Comparison, 1543-1644*, edited by M. Antoni J. Üçerler, 228-248 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Ralph Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan: 1549-1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 41. The *Sengoku* (Warring States) period officially lasted from 1467 to 1600, after which began the Tokugawa era.

Oda Nobunaga, who controlled more than half of Japan's provinces before his death in 1582. While Nobunaga maintained a close relationship with the Jesuit missionaries as a counter to the rising threat of militant Buddhist monasteries, his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, viewed the Christian priests with greater suspicion and eventually 'banished' them in 1587.<sup>10</sup> Though the newly-established government hardly upheld this proscription of missionaries, Hideyoshi's anti-Christian sentiments resulted a decade later in the martyrdom of twenty-six religious and lay individuals.<sup>11</sup> The Tokugawa shogunate, established in 1600, would continue persecution against foreign priests and Japanese Christians, with the latter community retreating underground as the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, forcefully expelled all Europeans from Japan in 1639.

In order to combine the processes of adoption and adaptation, which establishes Marian tradition as the reason for Christianity's survival in Japan, this analysis will initially discuss the importance of the *Ave Maria* prayer in linking doctrine and Biblical stories across generations. An examination of Higashibaba's transcription of both the original Latin prayer and a version from the nineteenth century, following two hundred years of secrecy and persecution, provides information on both the consistency and the longevity of the *Ave Maria* among descendants of the original hidden Christians. As much of the transmitting power of prayer comes from its constant repetition, this work will then identify the Marian tradition of the rosary as a method for encouraging meditation on Christian beliefs and, thus, perpetuating the religion. An examination of the *THK*, a collection of Biblical stories passed down orally during the Tokugawa period, demonstrates the influence of the rosary on the beliefs of Japanese Christians and its potential for sustaining doctrine over a long period of time. To assess longevity, or the success of the Marian tradition in the adoption and adaptation process, this paper will then study common examples of

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<sup>10</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century*, 69-70.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.



iconography and evaluate their ability to portray symbols in an adapted form. By examining doctrinal prayers, the rosary, and iconography of Mary, this research argues that the Marian tradition in Japan enabled Christianity to survive and adapt amidst a climate of oppression and martyrdom.

### **The Perseverance of Prayer**

Considering Mary's primacy among the Japanese Christians throughout the Tokugawa period, it only seems fitting that Japan's first introduction to Christianity took place on the Feast of the Assumption, a day celebrating Mary's entrance into heaven, on August 15, 1549.<sup>12</sup> Decades of Portuguese exploration in the South China Sea brought the foreign religion close to Asian lands, but only upon meeting Anjirō, a Japanese man and enthusiastic convert in Indonesia, did Francis Xavier consider leading a Jesuit mission to Japan.<sup>13</sup> Despite the auspicious date of arrival, Japan in the sixteenth century was engaged in a widespread civil war, with lords from over two hundred domains, or *han*, competing for power over a disunified state.<sup>14</sup> Though the threat of conflict weighed heavy on the nascent Japanese mission in this *Sengoku* period, the Jesuits focused their efforts on converting these regional lords, who could command mass conversions to Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Under the protection of Oda Nobunaga's growing leadership and friendship, the Jesuit missions freely evangelized in the southern *han*, succeeding in converting the lords and, subsequently, their loyal retainers in several domains on the southern island of Kyushu. The priests found the Japanese to be receptive to Christian teachings in these

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<sup>12</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century*, 37

<sup>13</sup> Hisashi Kishino, "From *Dainichi* to *Deus*: The Early Christian Missionaries' Discovery and Understanding of Buddhism," in *Christianity and Cultures: Japan and China in Comparison, 1543-1644*, edited by M. Antoni J. Üçerler. (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2009), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> John Nelson, "Myths, Missions, and Mistrust: The Fate of Christianity in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japan," *History and Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (2002): 98.

regions, and until Nobunaga's death in 1582, Christianity flourished, uninterrupted, in the country.<sup>16</sup>

Following Nobunaga's reign, the doctrinal prayers brought to Japan by the Jesuits in these early years of evangelization aided in the survival of Christianity by establishing its religious beliefs in a simple, recitable format that could then be transmitted to future generations. With too few Jesuit priests to minister to the increasing number of converts, the missionaries adopted the strategy of practice as dominant over doctrine. The physical instruction of doctrine, without proper supervision, remained vulnerable to distortion across a larger population, and so missionaries saw structured prayer as the best method for spreading Christian beliefs. As Higashibaba describes, "All such 'teachings' [biblical accounts] were ritually verbalized into a prayer format, and little theological reflection seemed to be required." The practice of prayer, or *orasho*, thus became the most significant aspect of Japanese Christian life.<sup>17</sup>

Among the thirty-five prayers contained within the seventeenth-century book of translated prayers, the *Orasho no hon'yaku*, the *Ave Maria* is the first to introduce Mary to the Japanese and preserve, in prayer format, her biblical role as the Virgin Mother of Jesus. The first half of the prayer, the *Hail Mary*, originated as a devotional, written by the Provost of Augsburg Cathedral in the tenth century, before being documented as an official prayer of the Church in 1198.<sup>18</sup> It directly references the Gospel of Luke in the words: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." The initial scene, known as the Annunciation, illustrates the archangel Gabriel's proclamation to

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson, "Myths, Missions, and Mistrust," 78.

<sup>17</sup> Higashibaba, "Christian Prayer," 108.

<sup>18</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, vol. 1 of *From the Beginnings to the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 230; Rolando V. de la Rosa O.P., "History of the Rosary," *Landas* 19, no. 1 (2005): 96. According to de la Rosa, the modern inclusion of "Jesus" at the end of the *Hail Mary* prayer originated with Pope Urban IV in 1261.

Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus—“Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.”<sup>19</sup> These words in the *Ave Maria* are quickly followed by another reference to Luke’s Gospel, in which Mary, who is then with child, is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth in the Visitation passage: “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”<sup>20</sup> By including the biblical narratives of the Annunciation and Visitation, the *Ave Maria* prayer thus affirms the doctrine of Jesus’ birth in a format that the Japanese Christians could easily memorize and recite on a daily basis to reaffirm these Christian beliefs.

The power of prayer to maintain these beliefs remains evident in the stories of the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* (abbreviated as *THK*), translated as “The Beginning of Heaven and Earth,” which were passed down orally among the hidden Christians during the Tokugawa era. Despite the centuries gap between the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries and the first transcription of the *THK* in the early nineteenth century, the stories of the Annunciation and Visitation are relatively untouched in the hidden Christians’ retelling.<sup>21</sup> The archangel Gabriel—here named San Gamuriya Arikanjo—does not offer the same greeting as in Luke’s Gospel, yet his explanation, “The Lord of Heaven is due to descend to earth, so please let us use your young and fresh body for the purpose,” still adheres to the doctrine of Jesus’ miraculous birth; even the inclusion of butterfly symbolism and elaboration on Mary’s life before this scene, while not biblically authentic, still does not contradict the doctrine handed down through the *Ave Maria*.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the representation of the Visitation in the *THK* continued to uphold these Christian beliefs as Elizabeth, or Izaberuna, recites, “Maruya [Mary], full of grace, to you I bow. The Lord is with you and blessed are you among all other women. Precious is the Jisūsu who is in

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 1:28

<sup>20</sup> Luke 1:42

<sup>21</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

your womb.”<sup>23</sup> These words, bearing heavy resemblance to the *Hail Mary* devotional, not only emphasize prayer as a method for preserving doctrine across populations and generations, but their accuracy demonstrates the purity of doctrine that these *orasho* maintain, that the belief after three hundred years was unchanged.

Adding to the doctrinal importance of the *Hail Mary*, the second half of the *Ave Maria*, or the *Holy Mary* invocation, establishes Mary’s role as both the Mother of God and a powerful mediator who would provide comfort during future suffering. Mary as the Mother of God, or *Theotokos*, first emerged in the fourth century in response to the rise of Arianism, a sect of Christianity that separated God from Jesus, making the Son dependent upon the Father, and defied the prevailing belief in Jesus’ full humanity and full divinity as the second person in the Trinity. In response, the 325 A.D. Council of Nicaea created a “statement of faith” to confirm one’s beliefs and uphold the doctrine of Jesus’ divinity: “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.”<sup>24</sup> As the mother of Jesus, Mary received the title ‘Mother of God,’ and so became a connection between heaven and earth, Jesus and the sinner. This unique relationship with Jesus formed a new role for Mary: the intercessor.<sup>25</sup>

The words of the *Holy Mary* invocation, formally published in the Catechism from the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, echo the decision from the Council of Nicaea as the faithful chant, “Holy Mary, Mother of God.”<sup>26</sup> Where previous prayers had implied this doctrine of *Theotokos*, requiring explanation of the divine nature of Jesus, the *Ave Maria* prayer plainly outlines Mary’s position as the Mother of God. The doctrine, then, could easily circulate in its purest form and perpetuate its belief among the hidden Christians as they suffered under duress

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<sup>23</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Rubin, *Mother*, 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> de la Rosa, “History of the Rosary,” 96.

to recant their faith. The following supplication of the *Holy Mary*, “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death,” recognizes Mary as the link between heaven and earth in her role as *Theotokos*. As the *Theotokos* doctrine was readily accepted through its inclusion in the *Ave Maria*, the Japanese Christians quickly embraced Mary in her role as intercessor. In order to hide their faith and avoid persecution during the Tokugawa shogunate, hidden Christians were forced to stomp on pictures of Mary and Jesus—a practice called *fumi-e*—and pretend to be Buddhist in public. Without a priest to offer the sacrament of Reconciliation and absolve these ‘grave’ sins, the hidden Christians had little recourse to forgiveness outside of prayer. Yet, rather than turning to the “stern and remote” God of the *THK*, Japanese Christians instead turned to Mary for assistance.<sup>27</sup>

Mary’s role as the intermediary between God and man, then, further solidified her primacy among the faithful during the oppression of the Tokugawa period. In the *THK*, this primacy manifests in the thirty-seven mentions of Mary’s name, as compared to only twenty-nine mentions of Jesus, who normally receives the most attention as the main actor in salvation history.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Mary’s importance among the hidden Christians is evident in her presence as the third person of the Trinity, a belief unique to their community in that it challenges the traditional conception of the Trinity as God as the Father, Jesus as the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesuit missionaries had emphasized this divine mystery as “God, three in one, creator of heaven and earth,” but the long absence of priests during the Tokugawa period allowed for gradual reinterpretation of the Trinity.<sup>29</sup> According to Japanese oral tradition, “In heaven, however the Holy Mother is the Mediator, and the Holy One is the savior. Deusu is the Father or Paateru, the Holy One is the Son or Hiiriyo, and the Holy Mother is the Suheruto Santo. Deusu

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<sup>27</sup> Turnbull, “Devotion to Mary,” 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Cooper, *They Came*, 377.

became three bodies although they were originally one.”<sup>30</sup> The Christians’ bestowal of divinity upon Mary as one of the three members of the Trinity reflects how highly they valued Mary as the “Mediator,” the source of the “desperate hope for the ultimate assurance of forgiveness in the world to come” and a fountain of maternal compassion.<sup>31</sup>

The *Ave Maria* prayer, in its emphasis on doctrine and Mary’s roles as both *Theotokos* and intercessor, ensured Christianity’s continual existence, yet the inclusion of a Latin and Japanese translation in the *Orasho no hon’yaku* strengthened the legacy of doctrine and prayer among the hidden Christians. The Latin words held no meaning to the Japanese laity, but the combination of chanted prayer and unfamiliar sounds gave the translation a mystical quality that hidden Christians saw as powerful.<sup>32</sup> Whether the Japanese used the Latin *orasho* for exorcisms or to erase Buddhist influence during a funeral, the heightened mystery surrounding the Latin prayers, in addition to the primacy of Mary, encouraged hidden Christians to pass down the *orasho* and Christianity itself to future generations.<sup>33</sup> Although the Christians valued the Latin original due to its inherent power, the Japanese translation of the *Ave Maria* allowed the faithful to understand and appreciate Christian doctrine. In providing meaning to Luke’s Gospels in the *Hail Mary* and demonstrating Mary as *Theotokos* and as intercessor, the Japanese translation of the *Ave Maria* enabled the primacy of Mary among the hidden Christians, who then passed down the powerful Latin translation and perpetuated Christianity through the Tokugawa period.

### **The Rosary and Its Mysteries**

Jesuit missionaries, in allying themselves with Nobunaga in the tumultuous politics of the *Sengoku* period, had hoped that his aspirations for a united Japan would secure their safety and

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<sup>30</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 62-63.

<sup>31</sup> Turnbull, “Devotion to Mary,” 16.

<sup>32</sup> Higashibaba, “Christian Prayer,” 113.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 112, 114.

capacity to spread Christianity through doctrinal prayer. His death only three decades after their arrival, though, quickly threatened their interests as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a general under Nobunaga, rose to power and completed the process of Japanese unification. Wary of any challenges to his authority, Hideyoshi took measures to cripple potential opponents as he gathered domains under his control, confiscated swords from the lower classes and restricted the social mobility that had once allowed him to rise from the peasantry to general.<sup>34</sup> Deviant religious institutions also became a target for stricter regulation, and with the removal of Buddhist militant sects under Nobunaga, Hideyoshi did not address Christianity with the same respect as his predecessor.

In the wake of disputes between Jesuits and newly arrived Franciscans and Dominicans, Hideyoshi ordered the expulsion of priests and missionaries from Japan in 1587. As noted previously, Hideyoshi demanded the crucifixion of twenty-six Christians in Nagasaki ten years later.<sup>35</sup> These martyrs, and those that followed in future executions, would suffer death by beheading, burning at the stake, or jumping into boiling water, yet missionaries noted their steadfastness in faith: “Their resolution is all the more to be admired, since they know but little, and can only read a Pater-Noster and an Ave-Maria. . .”<sup>36</sup> One Japanese believer, condemned within months of his conversion, even asked for a moment to pray before his beheading; his request granted, the Christian then meditated on the image of Jesus’ Descent from the Cross with a rosary. At the conclusion of his prayer, like many Japanese Christians before him, the convert was then martyred.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Nosco, “Early Modernity and the State’s Policies toward Christianity in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japan,” *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies* 7 (December 2003): 9.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, *They Came*, 338-339.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 386-387.

The concept of a rosary, with strings of beads that assist in the practice of repetitive prayers, is not unique to Christianity. Upon his arrival in Japan, the Jesuit missionary João Rodrigues remarked that “[Buddhists] always carry their beads in their hands and some people undertake as a daily exercise to invoke a certain short prayer. . .ten thousand times.”<sup>38</sup> The Christian rosary, however, has roots in early monastic life as the daily recitation of one hundred and fifty Biblical psalms, beginning in the twelfth century. As lay Christians adopted this practice, substituting the laborious memorization of psalms for the common *Pater Nostre*, they began counting their prayers with rocks and braided ropes.<sup>39</sup> In monasteries and convents, beads replaced the laity’s rope knots, and the repetition of numerous psalms soon transformed into recitation of the *Hail Mary* alone, divided into groups of fifty by other invocations, such as the *Pater Nostre* and the Creed.<sup>40</sup> The rosary underwent further changes in the early fifteenth century as two Carthusian monks, Henry Kalkar and Dominic of Prussia, respectively divided the fifty *Hail Mary* prayers into groups of ten and then linked the prayers with meditative phrases about Jesus and Mary.<sup>41</sup> In his writings from 1470, the Dominican priest Alanus de Rupe further promoted the practice as a sinner’s invocation for Mary’s compassion, and the rosary ultimately received papal approval in 1495.<sup>42</sup> Only a few decades later, the Jesuits would bring the rosary to Japan. The string of prayers, in its repetition of the *Ave Maria*, encouraged meditation on Christian beliefs and, thus, perpetuated the religion.

As João Rodrigues observed the prevalence of the Buddhist rosary in Japan, so were Japanese Christians ‘predisposed’ to embrace the Marian rosary and its doctrine through the

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<sup>38</sup> Cooper, *They Came*, 318.

<sup>39</sup> de la Rosa, “History of the Rosary,” 95.

<sup>40</sup> Graef, *Mary: A History*, 232-233; Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 306.

<sup>41</sup> de la Rosa, “History of the Rosary,” 96.

<sup>42</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 306.



period of religious persecution. One of the most prominent Buddhist schools in Japan during the Tokugawa era, Pure Land Buddhism, shared not only similar prayer methods with Christianity, but its core beliefs were also comparable with those of Christian salvation. Believers in Pure Land Buddhism do not have the innate ability to attain nirvana on account of their misdeeds, and rebirth in the Pure Land is only possible through “Buddha Amida’s salvific compassion and power.”<sup>43</sup> The absolution of sins and final salvation is then obtained through visualization of the sixteen views of the Pure Land, accompanied by recitation of the *Nembutsu* chant, “Namu Amida Butsu,” that Jesuit priests frequently heard at Buddhist temples.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Christians are barred from reaching heaven because of their sinful nature, with hope for salvation only found in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Though heaven is attainable through a combination of prayers, faith, and good works rather than meditation alone, the call for intercession in the *Ave Maria* prayer echoes the plea for salvation in “Namu Amida Butsu”; both ask for the grace to achieve redemption through their respective saviors.<sup>45</sup> The mirrored beliefs of the two religions, then, supported the conversion and continual faith of Japanese Christians through the rosary, a familiar religious tradition with a similar salvific role.<sup>46</sup>

While Jesus consistently remained at the center of Christian teaching, the primacy of Mary in the rosary emphasized her role as an intercessor in the believer’s journey to salvation, which established her as an instrumental figure not only in the Japanese adaptation of Christianity but also in its continuation over generations. Although martyrdom remained an inevitable future for stalwart believers, many other Christians were forced by local magistrates to

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<sup>43</sup> Shin, “Avalokitesvara’s Manifestation,” 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 25; Cooper, *They Came*, 346-347.

<sup>45</sup> Shin, “Avalokitesvara’s Manifestation,” 25.

<sup>46</sup> These similarities of faith, however, do not mean that Pure Land Buddhism was allowed to coexist with Christianity as a complementary belief system. As Ann Harrington describes in *Japan’s Hidden Christians*, new converts in certain regions would receive Marian rosaries in exchange for their Buddhist rosaries, which would then be burned (21).

reject their faith by stepping on images of Jesus and Mary in a public ritual called *fumi-e*. Rather than face God, who passes judgement on all people, the laity turned to Mary in their guilt as her intercession promised absolution regardless of their sins.<sup>47</sup> The repeated invocations for her prayers, counted on fifty beads, offered hope for salvation as generations of hidden Christians participated in *fumi-e* under the Tokugawa shogunate. In the mediatory power of the rosary, Mary thus persisted as a vital figure in Japanese Christianity, enabling the faith to survive through the *Ave Maria* prayers that offered hidden Christians a sense of peace and stability during periods of oppression.

Together with the plea for intercession in the *Ave Maria*, the rosary also imitates Buddhist traditions in its meditation on Biblical stories. Recitation of the Buddhist rosary assures salvation in the visualization of the sixteen views of the Amida's Pure Land, represented pictorially in the *Taima Mandala*; the faithful can then meditate on the *mandala* in order to orient their *nembutsu* prayers toward nirvana.<sup>48</sup> The Marian rosary initially consisted of meditation through the inclusion of various psalms in between each of the decades, yet by the fourteenth century, religious orders had replaced the psalms with contemplation on Biblical stories of Mary and Jesus.<sup>49</sup> In a 1483 book, *Our Dear Lady's Psalter*, a Dominican author formalized these fifteen stories, or mysteries, which were then divided into three sets—Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious—a century later.<sup>50</sup> This Marian tradition ensured the transmission of defining Christian narratives to other believers and their descendants by embedding Biblical stories within the rosary, a method of prayer involving repetition. Beyond the Marian doctrine contained within the *Hail Mary* and the *Holy Queen*, the mysteries of the rosary convey salvation history by

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<sup>47</sup> Shin, "Avalokitesvara's Manifestation," 18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Therese Agbasiere, "The Rosary: Its History and Relevance," *African Ecclesial Review* 30, no. 4 (1988): 244.

<sup>50</sup> de la Rosa, "History of the Rosary," 97.

relating the lives of both Jesus and Mary in a meditative setting. As generations of hidden Christians sought Mary's mercy and forgiveness in reciting the rosary, so did they also contemplate the mysteries that accompanied the *Ave Maria* prayers and passed on the integral story of Christian salvation.

The *THK*, recorded nearly three centuries after the Jesuits first introduced the rosary to Japanese Christians, exists as evidence for the enduring power of the rosary as it references the mysteries in its narrative structure. In translating the *THK*, both Whelan and scholar Tagita Kōya associate five "articles" mentioned in the text with the various mysteries, with the "Five Articles of the Morning" as the Joyful Mysteries, the "Five Daytime Articles" as the Sorrowful Mysteries, and the "Five Articles of the Evening" as the Glorious Mysteries.<sup>51</sup> Each mystery does not directly connect to its respective story in the *THK*, but the fifteen Biblical accounts all appear in various forms as adaptations within Japanese culture. The fifth Joyful Mystery of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple, for example, reminisces on Mary and Joseph's frantic search for the Child Jesus after he stays behind in Jerusalem without their knowledge; to their surprise, they discover him in a temple, asking questions and astounding the teachers with his responses.<sup>52</sup> In Luke's Gospel, the content of Jesus' conversation with the teachers is never stated. However, the *THK* verses greatly expand on the story with a long discussion between Jesus and the Buddhist scholar Gakujūran, in which Jesus refutes the tenets of Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> Without the presence of priests, years of reciting the joyful mysteries in the rosary enabled Luke's story to become one that reflected Japanese customs, changing Jewish teachers to Buddhist scholars and challenging Pure Land beliefs. The emerging story may no longer reflect

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<sup>51</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 98-100; Stephen Turnbull, "Acculturation Among the *Kakure Kirishitan*: Some Conclusions from the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*," in *Japan and Christianity: Impacts and Responses*, ed. John Breem and Mark Williams, 63-74 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 75.

<sup>52</sup> Luke 2:42-51.

<sup>53</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 54-55.

the exact Biblical narrative, but in allowing for Christianity to adapt to the culture of the hidden Christians, the Marian rosary helped the religion to become entrenched enough within the community to survive persecution under the Tokugawa shogunate.

Although the threat of martyrdom was a powerful deterrent for the growth of Christianity in Japan, the lack of priests provided an even larger obstacle as there was no one to administer sacraments and distribute the graces that they provided. Prayers, such as the rosary, took on enormous importance in the missionaries' absence. Without the ability to commune publicly and celebrate in the Mass, hidden Christians gathered to recite prayers and listen to readings in secret.<sup>54</sup> The image of Mary as Mother remained one of the few tangible manifestations of their faith which, along with her position in the *Ave Maria* as intercessor, made the rosary a foundational prayer among the “praying church” of the Japanese faithful.<sup>55</sup> The practice is simple to memorize and has no limitation as to who can participate, yet its prayers emphasize key points of Christian doctrine, allowing the rosary to fill the missionary gap and encourage the survival of Christianity amid oppression.<sup>56</sup>

### **Hiding Mary in Plain Sight**

The death of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1598 and the forceful consolidation of power by Tokugawa Ieyasu in the Battle of Sekigahara two years later left the Christian communities wondering as to their fate under a new shogunate. Hideyoshi's rule had been a conflicting mix of disregard and brutal martyrdom, but Ieyasu seemed to harbor no such ill-will towards Japanese Christians in his first years of rule. Interested in preserving European trade, he refrained from enforcing restrictions on Christianity until 1606, at which point he reminded the country of the continuation of Hideyoshi's ban. Ieyasu's proclamation targeted his political

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<sup>54</sup> Harrington, *Japan's Hidden Christians*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> Turnbull, “Devotion to Mary,” 8

<sup>56</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 337.

enemies, many of whom were sympathetic to Christians, rather than targeting the believers themselves, but the ban's restoration proved that the Tokugawa shogunate, too, would be hostile to the Christian presence in Japan.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the growing threat of government oppression, the beginning of Tokugawa rule was the most active period for Christians, with nearly three hundred thousand converts and one hundred forty-two priests to minister to them through schooling, sacraments, or teachings.<sup>58</sup> The growing devotion, however, soon threatened the Tokugawa leadership as vassals refused to recant their faith, despite direct orders from the shogun.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, although there were few martyrs before 1614, the Christian victims often “accepted this punishment for love of *Deus*; and dressed up in silk garments as if they were going to an extravagant banquet,” an expression of devotion that questioned their loyalty to the shogunate.<sup>60</sup> From that same year, Tokugawa Hidetada, Ieyasu's son and ruling shogun, forbade practice of the religion, ordered the destruction of churches, and commanded the eviction of all missionaries from Japan. These mandates greatly affected the large population of Christian peasants, though Hidetada's main target was the last daimyo supporters of the Toyotomi family in Osaka, many of whom had endorsed Jesuit efforts. As a result, many daimyo revoked their support of Christianity, and waves of persecution rolled through domains throughout the country.<sup>61</sup> European priests, in direct defiance of Hidetada's promulgation, persisted in their missionary work and even increased their population through smuggling in missionaries, yet those caught were quickly

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<sup>57</sup> Nam-lin Hur, *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37-38.

<sup>58</sup> Hirofumi Yamamoto, “The Edo Shogunate's View of Christianity in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Christianity and Cultures: Japan and China in Comparison, 1543-1644*, edited by M. Antoni Üçerler (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2009), 258; Shin, “Avalokitesvara's Manifestation,” 6.

<sup>59</sup> Yamamoto, “The Edo Shogunate's,” 267.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Boxer, “Clandestine Catholic Church in Feudal Japan, 1614-1640,” *History Today* 16 (1966): 54.

burned at the stake or beheaded.<sup>62</sup> Smuggling ended in 1630 on account of Tokugawa persistence, with regulations escalating each year. By 1636, the shogunate forbade Japanese individuals, no matter their religious affiliation, from leaving the country in order to fully ban Christian influence.

The onset of a four-month uprising in 1637 provided the ultimate opportunity to eliminate Christianity permanently. The Shimabara Rebellion, though not initially begun over religious issues, soon grew to emulate the ongoing religious conflict as many of the participants were Christian. Once suppressed, the rebellion convinced the Tokugawa shogunate to disregard any possible consequences to banning Christianity, such as tensions with Europe, and to officially banish the Portuguese from Japan in 1639.<sup>63</sup> A delegation of foreign missionaries sent from Macau to appeal the decree was promptly executed in Nagasaki the following year, thus ending missionary activity in Japan for over two centuries.<sup>64</sup> Ongoing suppression under the Tokugawa regime, with intermittent persecution and constant regulation, forced Japanese Christians to hide their faith through adaption to local traditions.

According to another retelling of Father Petitjean's first meeting with the hidden Christians in 1865, the narrative continues with the woman proclaiming, upon seeing the statue, "Yes, this is definitely *Sancta Maria*. She is holding Jesus in her arms!"<sup>65</sup> This imagery of Mary as Mother, cradling the child Jesus, was one of the first Christian images to penetrate Japanese culture. With pictorial representation as the easiest method of transmitting ideas, Xavier had arrived in Japan in 1549 with images of Mary and Jesus to illustrate the faith to potential converts. In a letter to fellow Jesuits in Goa, he describes the paintings' reception:

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>63</sup> Yamamoto, "The Edo Shogunate's," 260.

<sup>64</sup> Boxer, "Clandestine," 61.

<sup>65</sup> Wakakuwa, "Iconography of the Virgin Mary," 231.

When Paulo went to talk with the duke, who was five leagues away from Kagoshima, he took with him an image of Our Lady that we had brought with us. And the duke was very contented and kneeled down before the picture of the dead Christ and Our Lady and adored it with reverence, showing much delight.<sup>66</sup>

Following this interaction, the duke's mother requested a copy of this image of Mary, the genesis of the rich visual history of the Jesuit missions in Japan. Converts, who consistently favored the gentler imagery of Mary over that of the Crucifixion, encouraged production of Marian pictures in Japanese painting academies. The adaptation of this imagery, brought by European Christians but localized through its recreation by painters in Japan, further entrenched her presence within Japanese culture and enabled Christianity to take root.<sup>67</sup>

The original picture that Xavier brought to Japan, known as the *Salus Populi Romani*, depicts Mary with her arms wrapped around Jesus, who stares at his mother's face. The Greek at the top of the original painting labels her as the Mother of God—*Theotokos*—which maintains the theme of Mary as intercessor that was introduced with the *Ave Maria* prayer. Marian prayers and beliefs endured two hundred years of oppression due, in part, to the prevalence of the rosary, and so Mary's image as Mother was greatly revered as the majestic, yet maternal, *Theotokos*. The tenderness with which Mary holds Jesus in the painting exhibits the close bond of mother and son that only she can experience with Jesus, introducing her as the perfect mediator. Jesus looks up to her for guidance, the source of his human nature, but Mary's gaze remains on the sinner, who can then connect with her and ask for the grace to grow closer to her son.<sup>68</sup>

In the role of *Theotokos*, Mary assumes this link between humanity and the divine.<sup>69</sup>

Rather than standing before the viewer, she is seated on a throne, holding Jesus in her lap as she

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<sup>66</sup> Alexandra Curvelo, "Copy to Convert: Jesuits' Missionary Practice in Japan," in *The Culture of Copying in Japan: Critical and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Rupert Cox, 111-127 (New York: Routledge, 2008): 115.

<sup>67</sup> Wakakuwa, "Iconography of the Virgin Mary," 231.

<sup>68</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 132.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

stares ahead. On either side of her are saints, which change depending upon the patron, as well as two angels.<sup>70</sup> The imperial throne and the presence of angels embody the divinity of both the ‘Mother of God’ and ‘God who Became Man,’ yet the emphasis on Mary’s motherhood shows the humanity that is still present within them. Because this Marian image, representing her motherly compassion, was used to spread Christianity and sustain it in pictorial form during persecution, the Japanese Christians turned to her for her grace and intercession; indeed, in a Japanese explanation of Christian doctrine: “God is the one who forgives human sins; therefore, one asks God for forgiveness. Mary is the one who helps one make that request.”<sup>71</sup>

Two centuries following the expulsion of the Jesuits and the prohibition of their doctrine, the hidden Christians sustained this visual depiction of Mary as the human-divine connection through oral stories in the *THK*. One such story, not contained within the traditional Biblical narrative, begins with a worldly king’s desire to wed Mary, offering her any treasure should she acquiesce. Rather than accepting his offer, Mary exposes the transitory nature of his earthly treasures and calls upon heaven to reveal its presence in the miraculous appearance of food offerings and snow in August. She then ascends to heaven for the first time, leaving the king to pitifully yearn for her presence until his death.<sup>72</sup> Following Mary’s second ascension at the end of the *THK*, she attains the role of “Mediator” as the third person in the Trinity, formalizing in oral stories her connection between heaven and earth, which was first established for Japanese Christians within the *Theotokos* imagery. Mary, whom the hidden Christians named “Holy Mother,” then embraces her intercessory role as she requests God to save the king, who suffered

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<sup>70</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 63.

<sup>71</sup>Ikuo Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice* (Boston: Brill’s Japanese Studies Library, 2001), 69. This quote comes from the *Dochiriina Christian*, a Japanese translation of the catechism of Christian doctrine from the late sixteenth century.

<sup>72</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 46-47. In the *THK*, Mary ascends to heaven twice, returning to earth after the first time to become the mother of Jesus. Her second ascension at the Mount of Olives is the only one recorded in both the *THK* and the Bible, though the latter’s story has no mention of a particular setting.



on her account, and bring him to heaven as her husband.<sup>73</sup> This scene echoes the theme of the *Salus Populi Romani* as God the Father, like Jesus, looks to fulfill the requests of Mary the Mediator, who is both a maternal figure and heavenly being.

Mary's intervention on the king's behalf presents her as a prominent link between God and the hidden Christians, but the story also illustrates the adaptation of the European Marian image to Japanese conventions. The miracle of snow references a common Italian legend in which Mary placed snow on a hill in August where she desired a church to be built. Jesuit missionaries, who would have been familiar with this fourth-century tale, spread it among the new converts to encourage devotion and later established August 4<sup>th</sup> as a feast day for Japanese Christians. The *THK*, however, also connects Mary to the *tennin nyōbo*, or 'celestial wife', character that originated from the stories of Buddhist female idols. According to tradition, the *tennin* has a relationship with a mortal man, yet her divine nature inevitably divides them as she eventually returns to her "true element" and leaves the sorrowful man behind. Mary's interactions with the king closely mirrors this convention as he asks to marry her—the beginning of the relationship between the divine woman and mortal man—before Mary is assumed into heaven in a flowered wagon and receives the title "Santa Maruya of the Snow" from God.<sup>74</sup> Her integration with Buddhist tradition, which was wholly foreign to the Jesuit conception of Mary, displays the Japanese Christians' affinity for the Mother of God in that, despite centuries of persecution, they continued to revere her in various traditions and spread Christianity among their descendants.

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<sup>73</sup> Whelan, *The Beginning*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 89-90. 'Maruya' is the spelling of 'Mary,' or 'Maria,' in the *THK*. While no explicit reason is given for this particular spelling, Whelan supposes that *maru*, meaning circular, could represent "wholeness" or fertility. *Maru* is also a suffix used to delineate precious goods, but 'Maruya' might simply be a way to conceal Mary's name and escape persecution.

The Tokugawa shogunate, in addition to its more forceful orders against Christianity, instituted a system of regulation through Buddhist temples and resident communities that threatened the existence of Christian symbols, such as the *Theotokos*. The system required that Japanese families affiliate themselves with their local Buddhist temple, subjecting them to an annual inspection to certify that they were not Christian.<sup>75</sup> Further investigation within the community would corroborate the temple's assessment: groups within the village--named *gonin-gumi*--consisted of five families who would monitor each other's behavior and report any lingering adherence to Christianity.<sup>76</sup> While the constant monitoring of behavior and beliefs did inhibit public displays of faith, hidden Christians could maintain their religion in secret if all the families of the *gonin-gumi* were Christian.<sup>77</sup> However, the demand for secrecy and the forced affiliation with Buddhist temples motivated Christians to gradually adapt their faith to Japanese culture to enable its survival throughout the Tokugawa period.

Religious iconography, as a physical manifestation of devotion, thus disappeared as artists hid Christian imagery within preexisting, traditional figures. Given the primacy of Buddhism over Christianity under the Tokugawa regime, hidden believers masked Mary with the female figure of Kannon from Pure Land Buddhism. An honored figure among the faithful, Kannon is believed to be a bodhisattva, or a divine being who guides individuals to 'salvation'.<sup>78</sup> For Pure Land Buddhism, salvation is attained through entrance into the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, whose name the believer calls upon to garner his mercy. Humans are unable to reach the Pure Land through their own efforts due to their moral transgressions, so they must entreat both Amida and Kannon for assistance in achieving nirvana.<sup>79</sup> Kannon, known as the

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<sup>75</sup> Nam-lin Hur, *Death and Social Order*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Turnbull, "Devotion to Mary," 7.

<sup>77</sup> Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, 159.

<sup>78</sup> Cyril Veliath, "The Three Mothers: Kannon, Mary, and Shri," *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* 12 (1994): 173.

<sup>79</sup> Shin, "Avalokitesvara's Manifestation," 8.

‘bodhisattva of compassion,’ forgoes her own salvation to help others reach the Pure Land, and this existence in between earth and the Pure Land, sin and Amida, gives her a unique role as an intercessor for believers attempting to reach salvation.<sup>80</sup>

As a result of the similar maternal, intercessory nature between Mary and Kannon, hidden Christians continually associated the two figures, using Kannon to conceal their veneration of Mary during Tokugawa persecution. Kannon, though initially presented as a male attendant in Indian representations of Pure Land Buddhism, becomes female and motherly in later Chinese and Japanese adaptations, able to adapt to any gender that best assists in guiding believers to nirvana.<sup>81</sup> While Mary gains prominence within Christianity for her abundance of feminine compassion, so does Pure Land Buddhism emphasize Kannon’s maternal nature in the salvation narrative as an advocate for man.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Buddhists had their own set of prayers to Kannon, the Kannon *dharani*, nearly identical to the Marian rosary in the importance on set repetition and meditation.<sup>83</sup> Kannon presented, for the hidden Christians, a traditional Japanese figure to whom Mary could be linked in order to preserve Marian tradition despite constant oppression.

Iconography, in being a visible depiction of the faith, was thus the religious medium through which Mary and Kannon become most interconnected. Statues of Kannon often portrayed her as the “Child Sending Kannon,” with her holding a child in her lap or arm to bless families who desired children. This portrayal originated in China with a representation of Kannon, Guan’ yin, and a non-Buddhist religious figure, Niangniang; both female icons were displayed with children in their arms. Furthermore, Guan’ yin often had two children pictured at

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<sup>80</sup> Veliath, “The Three Mothers,” 173-174.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>82</sup> Hiroki, “Deconstructing Maria Kannon,” 29; Wakakuwa, “Iconography,” 238.

<sup>83</sup> Shin, “Avalokitesvara’s Manifestation,” 27.

her side: the “Good Wealth Boy” and the “Dragon King’s daughter,” which Japanese imagery of Kannon mimicked.<sup>84</sup> These statues, imported from China, were used to represent the image of Mary as *Theotokos* in creating a shared image of the mother and child that current research identifies as “Maria-Kannon.”<sup>85</sup> The most popular representation—the seated mother holding her child—directly illustrates the enthroned Mary, honored as the Mother of God, and Jesus from the *Theotokos*. Her hands imitate the tender hold on Jesus in the *Salus Populi Romani* and subsequent images with the same theme.<sup>86</sup> Mary’s feet, though, often rest on a lotus flower, a common motif within Buddhism. The children that appear beside Kannon are figuratively replaced by the angels that frequently accompany Mary and the child Jesus, yet the features of all the figures are general enough to allow ambiguous identification by both Christians and Buddhists. The only visible sign of Christian influence would be the subtle crosses hidden within their hands, necks, or clothing.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, Mary’s adaptability in the iconography of Maria-Kannon permitted the perpetuation of Christianity beneath the mask of Buddhism, preserving Mary’s role as intercessor and allowing Japanese Christians to maintain their faith without detection by the Tokugawa shogunate

## Conclusion

The Mary that first arrived in Japan in 1549 was not contrived by the Jesuits to be more amenable to Japanese culture or tradition, yet over the course of four centuries and a repressive regime, she became a highly revered figure among Japanese Christians. Her primacy within the faith and her adaptability within the local community supported Christianity through many years of persecution, ultimately revealing the presence of the hidden Christians to Father Petitjean in

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<sup>84</sup> Wakakuwa, “Iconography,” 244. Many of these figurines are found in collections, such as that of the Urakami Christian objects, in the Tokyo National Museum.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235.

<sup>86</sup> Hiroki, “Deconstructing Maria Kannon,” 37.

<sup>87</sup> Veliath, “The Three Mothers,” 178.

1865. Through the *Ave Maria* prayer, the Jesuits presented teachings of the faith, particularly the *Theotokos* and Biblical stories, in an easily transmittable format. The power that the Japanese perceived in the Latin translation ensured the prayer's longevity, yet the Japanese equivalent promoted the survival of doctrine through generations of hidden faith. Mary's roles as *Theotokos* and intercessor, enumerated within the prayer, were then passed down and embraced among the hidden Christians.

The rosary, as a string of *Ave Maria* prayers, continued to expand Mary's significance as she became an inherent part in the believer's journey to salvation. Japanese Christians, already accustomed to repetitious prayers and meditation from Buddhist practices, quickly adopted the Marian rosary as a prominent form of prayer. Meditation on the mysteries encouraged the memorization of Biblical stories among believers as well as among their descendants to sustain the faith. Also, with the dearth of priests following their expulsion in 1639, the rosary offered a sense of absolution without the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and so hidden Christians fully embraced Mary as a maternal, gentle intercessor.

This portrayal of Mary only becomes more emphasized in iconography, which the believers adapted to Buddhist imagery to escape punishment under the Tokugawa shogunate. The resulting blend of Mary and Kannon in Maria-Kannon reinforced their shared compassion and intercessory role in guiding an individual to salvation. Yet, these similarities not only allowed Christianity to endure in the Maria-Kannon imagery but also buttressed Mary as a dominant religious figure. Thus, Mary, in the *Ave Maria* and rosary, was brought to Japan as the compassionate Mother of God, yet her importance to the Japanese and adaptability to Japanese culture enabled her to be the Mother of Christianity in a time of Christian persecution.

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## Images



*Above left: Salus Populi Romani. 6<sup>th</sup> century. Tempera on wood. Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, Rome. Accessed May 3, 2019.*

[upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/SalusPopuliRomani2018.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/SalusPopuliRomani2018.jpg)

*Left: Dehua Kilns Maria Kannon. 16<sup>th</sup> century. Porcelain. Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo. Accessed May 3, 2019. [rwsmith.omeka.net/exhibits/show/maria-kannon/item/44](http://rwsmith.omeka.net/exhibits/show/maria-kannon/item/44)*

*Above: Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George. Sixth or early seventh century. Encaustic on wood. St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt. Accessed May 3, 2019. [www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)*