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MARIA-KANNON: THE MOTHER OF GOD IN BUDDHIST GUISE

*Maria Reis-Habito, Ph.D.**

Introduction

On March 17, 1865, Father Petitjean, a French missionary in Japan, saw a group of about fifteen people—women, men and children—approach the church that he had built in Nagasaki. It was one of the first churches to be established in Japan since the persecution of Christians almost three hundred years earlier at the beginning of the Edo Period (1600–1868). Father Petitjean opened the church and then knelt at the altar. Three middle-aged women approached him, knelt beside him, and one of them whispered:

“All of us have the same heart as you.” “Indeed?” asked the astonished priest. “Where do you come from?” he asked. “We are all from Urakami, where nearly all have the same heart.” Then one of the women asked: “Where is the statue of *Santa Maria*?” Instead of giving an answer, Petitjean conducted the group to the altar of the Blessed Virgin, and all knelt down with him and wept for joy, exclaiming: “Yes this is indeed *Santa Maria*! Behold her divine Infant in her arms!”¹

These people, who with some hesitation entered the church and wept as they saw the statue of the Blessed Virgin, were what came to be known as “Japan’s hidden Christians.” Their faith had survived for more than two-hundred years during a

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¹Johannes Laures, S.J., *The Catholic Church in Japan* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1954): 209–10.

time when all church and missionary activity had been banned in Japan. In the account which we received, Japanese Christians had first asked the priest to see the statue of the Blessed Virgin. During persecution, devotional objects—holy pictures, crosses, rosaries, statues—had been priceless treasures that helped the Christians preserve their faith. However, these objects were time and again seized by the authorities during raids. As a result, the Japanese Christians preserved their Christian beliefs by adopting statues of the Buddhist deity of compassion, *Kannon*, as substitutes for the images of the Blessed Virgin. Their devotional life centered around *Maria-Kannon*, or “Mary in Buddhist Guise.” When Bishop Lauceigne, Father Petitjean’s colleague, heard of these Christians in hiding, he hoped that their devotion in disguise might be part of the reevangelization of Japan.²

The exterior similarity between Mary and Kannon which was used by Japanese Christians was not only a device for avoiding persecution but also an indication of an inner relation between these two figures. It was this relation that sustained the faith of the Christians during the time of persecution.

This study will be divided into three parts. Part one will outline the most important texts related to popular Kannon piety and explain the characteristics of this piety in Japanese Buddhism. Part two will give an outline of the history of Christianity from its beginning in Japan to the time of persecution. Part three will analyze the inner connection between Mary and Kannon that can be gleaned from the testimony of the hidden Christians and their own version of the Bible.

1. *The Bodhisattva Kannon in Japan*

Between the first and the second century C.E. in India, the original monastic form of Buddhism gave rise to the more lay-oriented form of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Mahāyāna Buddhist texts first introduced the idea of the *bodhisattva*, the compassionate enlightened being, who vows to postpone his/her own entry into final Nirvana until all suffering living beings have

²Fujitwara Ken, “Hendobutsu Maria Kannon no shinzō,” in *Kannon shinkō*, ed. Hayami Tasuku (Tokyo: Yūsankaku Publishing Co., 1983), 290.

been saved. Among the numerous bodhisattvas which are mentioned in the texts as part of the entourage of the Buddha Sākyamuni, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara has had a significant position since early on. Avalokiteśvara is Sanskrit for *Kanzeon* (Chinese: *Kuan-shih-yin*) and can be translated as “the one who listens to the cries of the world.” Kannon is simply a short form of Kanzeon.

The Chinese Buddhist canon contains many texts about Kannon. These texts were introduced into Japan beginning in the sixth century. Four of these Chinese texts were especially important for the development of the Kannon cult:

- 1) In the *Pure Land Sutra*, which was translated into Chinese in the third century, Kannon resides in Buddha Amitābha’s Pure Land, a Buddhist paradise of great beauty that every believer aspires to enter. Kannon is described as a fully enlightened being, perfected in compassion and wisdom, who, together with other bodhisattvas, strives to teach and liberate all sentient beings.³
- 2) The *Contemplation Sutra*, translated in the fifth century, gives elaborate instructions on how to visualize the Bodhisattva Kannon. The text also describes Kannon as the assistant of the Buddha Amitābha. When a dying person utters the name of Buddha Amitābha, Kannon will come to that person as the leader of a heavenly host and escort him/her to the Pure Land where the person will be met by the Buddha in all his glory.⁴ This scene inspired a great many religious paintings that were used to instruct the believers who could not read the Chinese texts. These paintings can still be seen in many temples and museums in Japan.
- 3) The *Lotus Sutra*, which was also translated into Chinese in the fifth century, devotes a whole chapter to Kannon. This chapter, treated as an independent text, was copied,

³*Wu-llang shou ching, Tatsbōshinshūdatzōkyo* (hereafter abbreviated as *T*), no. 360, trans. Samgharvarman in C.E. 252. See Hisao Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo Publishing Co., 1994), 275–82.

⁴*Kuan wu-llang-shou-fo ching, T*, no. 365, trans. Kālyayaśas in C.E. 424. See Inagaki, *Three Pure Land Sutras*, 334–36, 341.

memorized, recited and depicted in countless murals and paintings. It explains Kannon as a miracle worker who comes to the rescue of every living being who invokes the bodhisattva's name. The many dangers wherein Kannon offers help are vividly depicted in the text: fires, floods, shipwrecks, attacks by robbers and bandits, imprisonment and impending execution. In these cases, the recourse to Kannon is motivated by worldly concerns, beginning with the need for self-protection and self-preservation. But the recourse to Kannon also bestows spiritual gains, such as the liberation from ignorance, hate, and greed.⁵ How is Kannon to be recognized? The text enumerates thirty-three different forms of Kannon. The bodhisattva can appear under the form of a Buddha, Bodhisattva, a layperson, monk or nun, boy or girl, dragon or demon—depending on which form is needed in a specific situation.

The many transformations of Kannon raise the question about the bodhisattva's gender. Although bodhisattvas have no specific sexual characteristics, Kannon is always addressed as a "good young man" in the text and, in the earlier period, depicted with a small moustache. The shift towards a female form of Kannon, clad in a white garment, took place in the T'ang-China period (618-907). (Since, in the context of Maria-Kannon, Kannon was clearly feminine, I will use feminine references throughout this paper.)

In Japan at an early date, thirty-three transformations of Kannon were systematized and popularized. For example, the pilgrimage to the thirty-three holy places of Kannon in the Kansai area of Japan refers to the number mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra*. A handbook for the pilgrim describes the pilgrimage as a means to develop faith in Kannon who saves one from suffering. The notion of Kannon's transformations will be a very important element in the genesis of the Maria-Kannon phenomenon.

⁵*Miao-fa Hien-hua ching*, T., no. 262, trans. Kumārajīva in 406 C.E. See *The Three-fold Lotus Sutra*, trans. Bunnō Katō, Yoshirō Tamura and Kōjiro Miyasaki (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1975): 319-27.

- 4) In the *Heart-Sutra*, which was translated into Chinese in the sixth century, Avalokiteśvara is rendered in Chinese as *Kuan-tzu-tsai*, meaning “the one whose gaze is unimpeded.” The *Heart Sutra*, which is widely read and revered by all schools of Buddhism, contains the Bodhisattva’s insight into the absolute emptiness of phenomena.⁶

These texts combine to create a Bodhisattva who brings people to salvation in the afterlife; who vows to transform the hate, greed and ignorance of every living being into enlightenment; and who takes on different forms to correspond to the situation in which her help is needed. She is depicted as one who has realized the highest form of Buddhist wisdom and practice, insight into emptiness and the boundless compassion which flows from this insight.

Kannon’s cult in Japan preceded that of the Buddha Amitābha (Japanese: *Amida*) of the Pure Land. In 680 C.E., when the Emperor Temmu was very ill, a hundred Kannon images were set up within the palace, and two hundred volumes of the Kannon chapter were read; Kannon temples were gradually established all over the empire.⁷ The official cult of Buddha Amida began in 760 C.E., when, at the death of Empress Komyo, a painting of Amida’s Pure Land had to be made in every province of the empire and, one year later, that of Amida and his attendant bodhisattvas—Kannon and Seishi—had to appear in every provincial nunnery.⁸ Apart from Kannon’s importance as an intermediary between the realm of the living and the dead, Kannon was also revered as the miracle worker described in the *Lotus-Sutra*. In China, Korea and Japan, popular works about Kannon’s miraculous saving powers abound. The earliest Japanese work of this kind is the *Nihon Ryōiki*, a ninth-century work about miraculous stories from the Buddhist tradition. It contains fifteen stories in which

⁶*Pan-fo p'o-lo-mi-t'o hsin-ching*, T, no. 251, trans. Hsüan-tsang in C.E. 646. See Donald S. Lopez, *The Heart Sutra Explained* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1988), 19.

⁷M. W. de Visser, *Ancient Buddhism in Japan* (2 vols.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1935), 2:637.

⁸De Visser, *Ancient Buddhism*, 1:325.

the devotion to a wooden statue or an image of Kannon brings immediate reward.⁹

As early as the ninth century, the belief in Kannon's paradise gave rise to a particular custom that was later witnessed, described and criticized by the missionaries. Kannon was believed to reside on a mountain in the Southern Sea, a place described in the *Flower Garland Sutra*. This mountain, called Potalaka (*Fudaraka* in Japanese), was originally associated with Sri Lanka, but, with the spread of the Kannon devotion to China and Japan, local places were identified with Potalaka, such as Puto Island near Ningbo in China and Nachi, Kumano, in Japan.¹⁰ Starting from the ninth century, and especially during the period of the Warring States (1477-1573), devout people set out by boat into the sea to go to Potalaka, which was believed to be the entrance to Amida's Pure Land. It was partly the belief in a better afterlife—away from the devastation, famine and sickness caused by the war—that led people to seek salvation by drowning in the water.

Many missionaries report on this custom, called "Crossing the Sea to Potalaka"; the text by the Jesuit Luis Frois is most detailed. Those who were to set out on the boats first purified themselves by fasting and ascetical discipline for some days before the event. Their boats were built with great care by the community. They were given new clothes and gold by those who sponsored their voyage. When they set out on their voyage, they were seen off by the crowd. Some people were appointed to follow them and be witnesses to their jumping into the water; the witnesses were to set their boats afire. Back at the shore, a small temple was erected in honor of those who had crossed the sea, and they were worshipped as Kannon by the remaining crowd.

Frois mentions how he and his colleague Almeida were given angry looks when they entered the small temple and

⁹Kyoko Nakamura, *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition: The Nihon Ryōiki of the Monk Kyōka* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

¹⁰Hayami Tasuku, "Kannon jōdō o toku Kegonkyō," in *Kannonsama nyomon* (Kyoto: Daihōinsensho Series No.1, 1986), 128-35.

were recognized as Christians.¹¹ The missionaries were regarded as alien elements, intruders, in this community which had just witnessed some of their chosen members' "Crossing to Potalaka." The missionaries interpreted this custom simply as a form of suicide caused by the devil. They failed to understand that "Crossing the Sea to Potalaka" was a religious act of deep significance for the whole community. By sacrificing their lives, the ascetics were believed to have achieved three objectives. First, they attained salvation and became Kannon bodhisattva themselves. In this way, they extended their help and protection to their community, their sponsors and their loved ones who had remained in this life. Secondly, they made expiation for all the sins of those who remained at the shore. Thirdly, they would welcome every believer at the time of his or her death and assure each person a happy afterlife in Amida's paradise.¹²

In this way, the crossing to Potalaka created an intimate bond between those gone ahead to the other world and those remaining in this world. The ascetics had become Kannon themselves and would ensure the physical and spiritual well-being of the members of their community until all were reunited in the other world. It was into this cultural setting that the missionaries introduced the tenets of the Catholic faith. Thus, the popular belief in Kannon at the time of the missionaries' arrival helped shape the way in which the new Christians formed their understanding of Mary.

2. Christianity in Japan

Francis Xavier arrived in Japan in 1549, together with his guide Paul Yajiro, a Japanese convert whom he and other missionaries had met in Goa. Japan was divided into many contending feudal states, and the missionary activity depended upon the approval of the ruling lord. During his stay of twenty-seven months, Francis Xavier won several converts among the Samurai, the Buddhist priests and common people. His work

¹¹Mitsuhashi Ken, "Iyesuskai senkyōshi no mita fudarakutōkai," in *Kannon Shinkō*, 262-64.

¹²Fujiwara Ken, "Hendobutsu," in *Kannon shinkō*, 289.

continued under Cosme de Torres. There were new arrivals of missionaries, and when Gaspar Vilela left Japan in 1571, there were almost 30,000 converts. The real increase came later through the conversion of the Kyushu Daimyo of Omura, Arima and Bungo, which opened the door to increased missionary activity in this area. When the Italian Jesuit Alessandro Valignano, the chief protagonist for the formation of a native clergy in Japan, wrote his second report on the Japanese mission in 1583, he estimated that there were about 150,000 converts in Japan. Comparing them to the other "rice-Christians" in Asia, he praised the Japanese for accepting Christianity, not from any motives of personal profit or gain but based solely on arguments appealing to their reason and faith. They were interested in and respected the missionaries and their message. Converts were held in great respect by their heathen compatriots, and, among them, there were many capable candidates for ordination to the priesthood. Valignano claimed that the innate good qualities of the Japanese Christians far outweighed their defects, and that Japan was the only Asiatic mission which could become a self-supporting Christian country with a native clergy of its own. This positive assessment made Japan the most popular mission field with the Jesuits.¹³

But soon, clouds cast shadows on the bright future of the missions in Japan. In 1587, the warlord Hideyoshi viewed the influence of the missionaries and the foreign powers behind them as a menace, and he issued a famous edict prohibiting Christian proselytizing and ordering all foreign missionaries to leave immediately. Although the order was completely unexpected, the missionaries quickly adapted and continued their work in private ways. However, Franciscan missionaries arriving in 1592 did not take the edict of 1587 seriously; they began openly promoting Christianity and establishing churches and hospitals. In 1596, an unfortunate incident occurred. A Spanish merchantship, the "San Felipe," was stranded at Tosa. As the crew argued with the Japanese authorities, one crew member tried to intimidate the Japanese by boasting about the power

¹³C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Lmtd., 1993), 36-39, 18-80; and Laures, *Catholic Church*, 1-13, 99-109.

and territorial expansion of Spain. This report was instrumental in convincing Hideyoshi of the ulterior purpose of the Christian missions, namely to bring Japan under Spain's colonial power. In his fury, he ordered the capture and crucifixion of twenty-six missionaries and converts, most of whom were Franciscans. Their martyrdom took place early in 1597.¹⁴

In 1600, dictatorial power was assumed by Iyeasu, the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Dominicans and Augustinians entered the country, but dissension among the missionaries, aggravated by the coming of the Dutch and English who supplied derogatory information about Spain and Portugal, led Iyeasu to banish Christianity from Japan. In 1614, hundreds of Christians were deported from Nagasaki, and missionaries and Christians who remained were apprehended, tortured and killed. The Shimabara uprising of Christians in 1637-38 led to the extermination of more than thirty thousand insurgents, including women and children, and to the reign of national seclusion that lasted until 1859.¹⁵

3. *Maria-Kannon*

The Christians who went into hiding and persevered in their faith for seven generations resided mostly in the southern part of Japan, in Kyūshū and its offshore islands.¹⁶ The suppression of Christianity was carried out with thoroughness and consistency by the officers of the agency established for that purpose in 1640. Christians had to be careful not to give any outward indication of their religious identity. Part of the work of the officers consisted in interrogating people who were suspected of being Christians and of making them trample on Christian symbols and pictures (*fumie*). If they did not comply, they were sentenced to death. Another device was the so-called *shūmon aratame*, the examination of religion. It required all citizens to appear once a year at a temple or in

¹⁴Boxer, *Christian Century*, 144-54; Laures, *Catholic Church*, 109-29.

¹⁵Laures, *Catholic Church*, 155-79.

¹⁶For a study of the hidden Christians, see Ann M. Harrington, *Japan's Hidden Christians* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1993).

front of a magistrate, to declare officially which Buddhist sect they belonged to and to sign a declaration of affiliation for themselves and all the members of their family. The earliest extant records of this examination go back to 1635, and the latest are dated 1871.¹⁷

One of these records, dated 1857, describes the interrogation of a farmer, called Hayashi no Kichizō, the head of a family of eight. The report states that Hayashi had “a white standing ceramic Buddha-statue, called Virgo Santa Maria, passed on to him from his ancestors, which he worshipped.” Hayashi explained to the magistrate that he “recited the prayer ‘Gracia Ave Maria (Hail Mary) who art in heaven,’ which he had learned orally from his parents,” and that he prayed the “Ave Maria” in front of the “main deity (*bonzon*) Santa Maria, which is the statue of Kannon,” trusting that “in this world, he would have a good harvest, and that everything else would go well, that all his wishes concerning a long life would be fulfilled and that in the future life, he would be reborn in *paraiso* (paradise) together with his parents, his wife and his brothers.”

To the officials, Hayashi identified himself as a member of a Buddhist sect who worshipped “a Buddha by the name of Santa Maria.” He is quoted as saying: “The Buddha manifested as Kannon holding a child assumes the form of Santa Maria taking care of the child Jesus—which is no other than Kannon.” In other words, Santa Maria is a transformation (*keshin*) of Kannon.¹⁸

As we previously saw, the idea that Kannon can take different forms is already contained in the *Lotus Sutra* and was further developed in the texts of the esoteric Buddhist school. Other hidden Christians gave exactly the same explanation as Hayashi when asked about their faith in Maria Kannon, namely, that Mary is a Buddhist deity. So, for instance, in an earlier report, dated 1805, we find mention of a different

¹⁷Laures, *Catholic Church*, 174–75.

¹⁸Fujiwara Ken, “Hendobutsu,” in *Kannon shinkō*, 290–91. For an explanation of the Buddha-body doctrine as basis for the notion of Kannon’s transformations, see Ruben Habito, “The Trikāya Doctrine in Buddhism,” *Buddhist Christian Studies* (University of Hawaii Press), 6 (1986): 53–63.

Buddhist sect that “worships a Buddha called Deus tecum Virgin Santa Maruya.”¹⁹

Now, the device used by the Christians—explaining a Christian figure as a Buddhist deity—has a long tradition in Japanese religious thinking. When Buddhism was first introduced to Japan, the question of how the indigenous Shinto deities were to be explained in relation to the new Buddhist pantheon was raised. The solution was presented in the concept of *Honji Suijaku*. The Buddhist pantheon was explained as *Honji* (the original or real entity), and the gods of Shinto as *suijaku* (the manifested trace). In this way, every Shinto deity was regarded as an indigenous Japanese manifestation of a certain Buddhist deity, and Buddhist inner sanctuaries were added to the Shinto shrines. The concept of *Honji Suijaku* thus paved the way for the adaptation of Buddhism to the native religion.²⁰ In a similar way, the explanation of Mary as a form of Kannon helped the Japanese to integrate Christianity into their own cultural background.

What can be said about the hidden Christians’ understanding of Mary? As a first point of reference, there is the report of Hayashi Kichizō noted above. His devotion to Mary in the form of Kannon is nurtured by the two elements which are also typical of the Kannon devotion, namely, the desire for success in this life and the hope for rebirth together with one’s family in the other life. Like Kannon, Mary is the mediator between this life and the other life and the central figure through whom the unity of the living members of the family and their ancestors, from whom the faith was received and passed on, is established.

A second reference is a book entitled *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* (The Beginnings of Heaven and Earth) that was discovered in the nineteenth century. This book, a type of disguised Christian Bible, tells the story of the creation and of Jesus as recalled by the early Christians. It contains many Buddhist and

¹⁹Fujiwara Ken, “Hendobutsu,” in *Kannon shinkō*, 291.

²⁰Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion* (Rutland, VT, and Tokyo: Charles Tuttle Co., 1963), 136–37.

folk elements.²¹ Noteworthy is the important position of “Maruya” (the name Christians used for Mary) in the text. “Deus” is mentioned sixty-six times in the text; “Maruya” (or the “virgin”) is mentioned forty-five times, and, if we count the expression “mother,” this number is even higher.²²

Here we wish to look at the points that illuminate the hidden Christians’ understanding of Mary. Maruya is described as a young girl who is constantly thinking about her salvation and the afterlife, until, one day, she hears a miraculous voice from heaven telling her that if she “practices” virginity her whole life she will be saved.²³ Just this passage, in which virginity is qualified as a *gyō* (ascetical practice), reminds us of the Buddhist practitioners who undertook ascetical practices for a period of time before going into the water, so that they would be saved quickly (“Crossing the sea to Potalaka”).

Maruya gladly “vows” to stay a virgin, and, when confronted by the king of Luzon who wants to marry her, she implores heaven to send a miracle. In answer to her prayer, several feet of white snow fall, even though it is in the middle of August, and cover the king and his entourage.²⁴ “At this very moment,” Maruya goes up to heaven, where God calls her the “Snow

²¹Harrington’s *Japan’s Hidden Christians* contains a short analysis and summary of the text (pp. 75–93). There is a new and complete translation of the text by Christal Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).

²²Fujiwara Ken, “Hendobutsu,” in *Kannon shinkō*, 292.

²³Fujiwara Ken, “Hendobutsu,” in *Kannon shinkō*, 292–93.

²⁴This miracle of snow falling in the middle of August refers to a legend about the establishment of the church Santa Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. The church was originally built by Pope Liberius (352–366). According to the legend that originated a few centuries later, an heirless patrician (John) and his wife prayed to Our Lady to show them where they should put their fortune. On August 5th, snow fell on the summit of the Esquiline Hill, and, following a vision, they built a Basilica in honor of Our Lady on the spot that had been covered with the snow. Originally, the feast of Our Lady of the Snows was celebrated on August 5th only at Santa Maria Maggiore; it was later made a universal feast by Pius V. (See *The Catholic Encyclopedia* [New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1911], 9:361.) The element of the virgin refusing the king’s request for marriage may also refer to the 5th-century legend about St. Cecilia, the Virgin Martyr (see *The Catholic Encyclopedia* [same ed.], 3:472) (I thank Bro. Lawrence Scrivani, S.M., for these references.)

Santa Maruya," and then she immediately returns to her home on earth.²⁵ Here, Mary's "vow" to remain a virgin in order to attain salvation is an allusion to Kannon's vow to save all sentient beings. That she can go to heaven "at this very moment" and come back to earth also is a reference to Kannon's free movement between the two realms of this world and the other world. Working miracles is another point of commonality.

Maruya's concern about salvation in the afterlife is further elaborated upon in the text. She goes to heaven and implores God to save the king of Luzon, who may have died broken-hearted because of her refusal to marry him. Upon her intercession, God declares that the king is already saved, and that he and Maruya shall become husband and wife in heaven. The text then goes on to give an explanation of Maruya's function in Christianity, which is not exactly according to orthodox teaching. "Holy Mother, in heaven you take on the role of an intercessor, you take on the role of a helper; the Heavenly Father is *Pater*, the Son is *Filio* and the Holy Mother is *Spirito Santo*."²⁶

In this text, Mary is regarded as one person of the Divine Trinity, identified with the Holy Spirit, considered to be the feminine aspect of the Divine.²⁷ Here, we must ask whether this understanding of Mary was also influenced by Buddhist notions of Kannon. According to Fujiwara Ken (on whose interpretation of the *Tenchi* I have relied), the Buddhist influence was definitely present. He sees the working of *ki* (which means both "breath" and "spirit") as the underlying basis for an understanding for Maruya and Kannon respectively. On the Christian side, the *Tenchi* describes how God the Father created everything through his breath, and how everything which partakes in this breath is an expression of this breath. Mary was filled with this breath when the Holy Spirit entered her in the form of a butterfly and she conceived Jesus. The Japanese

²⁵Fujiwara Ken, "Hendobutsu," in *Kannon shinkō*, 292.

²⁶Fujiwara Ken, "Hendobutsu," in *Kannon shinkō*, 294-95.

²⁷In the early Syriac tradition, there was the same awareness of the Holy Spirit as the feminine aspect of the godhead. See Sebastian Brock, "'Come, Compassionate Mother . . . , Come Holy Spirit': A Forgotten Aspect of Early Eastern Christian Imagery," *Aram* 3/1&2 (1991): 249-57. (I thank Chorbishop Dominic Ashkar for this article.)

Christians, cut off from communication with the rest of the Church during their time of persecution, thus formulated their belief in the Holy Trinity as consisting of Father, Mother, and Son—with the Mother representing the Spirit.

From a Japanese perspective, which incorporated elements of Shintoism and Taoism, *ki* is a key concept, just as *ruah* or *pneuma* in Christianity. The working of the spirit (*ki*) is described as transformation (*ge*) or miracle (*ki*). Kannon is the Bodhisattva mentioned most frequently in the *Nihon ryōiki*. This is probably because Kannon is described as transforming herself according to the needs of sentient beings. But there must be a human disposition for the working of Kannon, or, in Christian terms, an openness to the working of grace. This “disposition” is also pronounced as *ki*. The human disposition corresponds to the transformative working of the Spirit. Since, in Kannon, the working of the spirit is understood as being a transformation (both of Kannon and of other beings), the meaning of *ki* (spirit) and *ge* (transformation) became inseparable.

As Christians hold, according to the *Tenchi*, that everything is imbued with the Spirit or “breath” of God, so Buddhists believe that everything is sustained by *ki*. Both Mary and Kannon share in the transformative power of the Spirit, through Whom/which they are able to perform miracles. In fact, the *Tenchi* explains the very existence of Mary as itself miraculous. Now, this character, *ki*, is also contained in the word *tenki* (weather). And the weather is important for a farming society that depends on the survival and growth of its crops. It is precisely for a good harvest that Hayashi Kichizō prayed in front of his Maria-Kannon figure, explaining that “there is nothing that does not fall under her graceful compassion.”²⁸

The Kyūshū farmers who persevered in their Christian faith for seven generations lived a faith that was based not on doctrine, but on life itself, and its exigencies. To them, Mary—like Kannon—was a figure imbued with *ki*, a figure who represented for them the creativity and blessings of nature, the all-compassionate mother, the central entity on which their family tradition and self-understanding were grounded. It was from

²⁸Fujiwara Ken, “Hendobutsu,” in *Kannon shinkō*, 290–300, esp. p. 299.

this understanding that they told Father Petitjean that “we have the same heart as you.” And, from the above, it is clear that the connection between Mary and Kannon was not just based on the external similarity of a mother holding a child, but on an intrinsic symbolic connection that united these two figures of compassion. The way this connection manifested itself in the life of the Japanese hidden Christians is a matter for further theological reflection.²⁹

²⁹For a comparison of the two figures and of their spiritual significance, see Maria Habito, “The Bodhisattva Guanyin and the Virgin Mary,” in *Buddhist Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 61–71. For an exploration of its implications for Buddhist-Christian practice, see Reuben Habito, “Maria-Kannon Zen—Explorations in Buddhist-Christian Practice,” in *Buddhist Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 105–14.