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How Properly Contextualized Christianity Could Benefit Japan

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“How Properly Contextualized Christianity Could Benefit
Japan”**

written by

Benjamin N. Highsmith

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Introduction

Christianity appears to be a dying religion in modern Japan. Little more than one percent of Japanese people claim to be Christian. Many Japanese people find it to be a mystical and intimidating thing. Many more simply see it as another set of rules to be followed. However, this thesis aims to answer the question “how could properly contextualized Christianity benefit Japan?” This question is imperative for missionaries and Japanese Christians alike as evangelization, among many other interactions, are likely to fail if one does not understand Japanese culture and contextualize the Gospel in a way that aligns with the culture without compromising God’s Word. The methodologies used to answer this question include personal interviews, research experts, various scholarly sources, and personal observations. In this paper, we will cover the following:

- Barriers to Christianity in Japan.
- How Japanese society perceives Christianity.
- Japanese Christian beliefs and perceptions.
- How Christianity, when proper contextualized, could benefit Japan.

The primary argument is that the message of hope that is central to Christianity could benefit Japan by encouraging love and improving interpersonal relationships while focusing on the greater good. This conclusion was arrived at because Christianity and Japanese culture both emphasize service in the context of the greater good of collective humanity. Japan encourages it through respect, conformity, and fear. Christianity, on the other hand, encourages unity through respect, love, and cooperation. Christianity could bring about opportunities for growth and deeper relationships to Japanese people all without breaking the social norms of Japanese culture.

Barriers to Christianity in Japan

Christianity could also bring much-needed respite and support to Japanese youth, improving familial bonds by emphasizing gentle discipline as opposed to traditional Japanese emotional distance and strict discipline. Without overturning societal norms altogether, Christianity could greatly benefit Japanese society as a whole by filling it with hope. Christianity will still inevitably go against the grain in some aspects of Japanese culture, but that doesn't mean that Christianity and Japanese culture are incompatible. Japanese beliefs encourage conformity for the sake of harmony, a Confucian concept at its core, among many other traditional beliefs. Christianity encourages harmony for the sake of love, which is often found through differentiation. This stark contrast presents quite the conundrum. However, while it is a challenge, it is by no means impossible to overcome. This thesis will discuss the various issues troubling Japan, explain why Japan has previously rejected Christianity, and, most importantly, how Christianity could be contextualized in such a way that it aligns with their core values without losing its meaning. The Japanese people would hopefully not only receive it, but greatly benefit from it.

When Japanese are asked about what they are like and what makes Japanese people so different from the rest of the world, they have plenty of positive things to say. However, you will also commonly hear the phrase “we're shy,” or “I'm shy,” sprinkled in. While, at first, this statement may seem sweet on the surface since most Japanese people appear friendly, if not a bit shy and awkward, this term goes far deeper than what most foreigners can perceive. In fact, it hints at many of the core issues around which this thesis revolves. When asked about their personality, a Japanese person will often state that they are shy. However, in this instance, the word they often use is “*hazukashii*” (恥ずかし). Translated literally, it represents

embarrassment. They are “embarrassed,” or find it embarrassing, to share their thoughts on things, or they find certain subjects to be embarrassing that a foreigner might not. It is synonymous with Japanese behavior to share this ideal, thus “*hazukashii*” is often translated as shyness within proper context. Quite frankly, it holds a deeper meaning that is entirely different from the typical English application of the word “shy.”

This term holds weight on its own. Yet, anyone who reflects more deeply into why it seems that the natural response of most Japanese people is to claim they are shy and embarrassed will find years of cultural conditioning behind the term. This conditioning primarily descends from the Confucian concept of harmony. While Confucianism is a belief system originating within China, many Confucian ideologies have become so deeply rooted within Japanese culture that they have effectively become Japanese to the general populace of Japan. While many might not naturally associate their social behavior with Confucianism, with research it quickly becomes clear that many unique Japanese behaviors stem directly from Confucian ideas that have melded with Japanese culture. These morals, standards, and ideals, in a sense, have become an integral part of their society and a part of their way of life. And, in Japan, harmony, most commonly referred to as “*wa*” (和), is a way of life.

Harmony plays a crucial role in defining how a Japanese person should behave, such as what is socially acceptable and what is unacceptable, as well as how to “fit in.” It plays a key role in nearly all of the social dynamics discussed in this thesis and is the basis of Japan’s collectivist tendencies. It affects familial relationships and romantic relationships, as well as friendships, business opportunities, and societal acceptance. To many, it is the Japanese way. The desire to maintain harmony has turned many away from the Christian faith. Disrupting the harmony amongst one’s colleagues can destabilize one’s entire life, and most religions are

perceived as disruptive by most Japanese people, including Christianity. This impasse must be acknowledged before one can even begin to argue in favor of Christianity. It is one of the greatest challenges one will face when it comes to effectively spreading the Gospel in Japan in such a way that it will meet the cultural need for harmony and thus be accepted. Here is a closer look at what Japan's concept of harmony is, as well as why it is so important that it be understood.

Japan's concept of harmony is deeply complex, but it can still be summarized. It is a "state of balance and equity. . .the ultimate basis of all activities. Thus, the ultimate goal of personal and social actions is realizing harmony."¹ Harmony is an end in and of itself. It is a foundation through which activities are performed for the purpose of maintaining harmony. Which is simultaneously logical and yet quite mind-boggling for those who have been raised in individualistic societies. Japanese have come to agree that their society is better when they maintain harmony amongst themselves. As a result, they purposefully hide away their own disputes and look past their differences so that they might work together in harmony.

On the surface, this is a wonderfully effective tool for guiding behavior. It is visible in Japan's excellent customer service, general politeness, clean streets, and more. However, it can be highly damaging to most social relationships. Many Japanese people will withhold their true thoughts and opinions, whether helpful or not, from discussions. This is done in order to maintain harmony with others, lest one of their ideas be found shocking or offensive. Thus, they claim to be "shy" as they withhold their true thoughts. If one goes against this and shares an idea that is found to be extreme or offensive, they risk being punished. Most commonly, their actions

¹ Wai Wai Chiu, "Tension and Harmony: A Comment on Chenyang Li's The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony," *Philosophy East & West* 67 (January 2017): 237-245.

become a topic of gossip, through which others put them under pressure. The person then must either correct or deny their actions, otherwise they will become a social outcast.

One missionary, when interviewed, shared quite the heart wrenching tale. A Japanese man who had recently come to Christ was sharing about his difficulties in expressing his beliefs to his family. Toward the end of the discussion, he made a simple statement. "I can't. I'm Japanese." He felt that, due to his family and his Japanese background, he could not be a Christian, despite his beliefs. He was also likely too afraid to potentially disrupt the harmony and damage his relationships. His plight is the plight of many who choose to pursue Christ in Japan. Dr. Minoru Okuyama, director of a Missionary Training Center in Japan, shared this sentiment during a presentation. "They are afraid of disturbing human relationships of their families or neighborhood even though they know that Christianity is the best. Thus, Japanese make much of human relationships more than the truth. Consequently, we can say that as for Japanese, one of the most important things is harmony; in Japanese 'Wa.' Those who harm the harmony are bad, whether they are right or not has been beside the question."² One must acknowledge that to disrupt the harmony in Japan is to harm society, and can lead one to being outcast, as will be discussed later. But it also can cause one to appear as if they are rejecting their own family.

One instance is of a man whose zealous faith cost him his relationship with his family. Missionaries had been encouraging those involved at their church to tell their families about their faith, thus encouraging the spread of Christianity. Unlike the man who said he could not believe it because he was Japanese, this man had the courage to risk disrupting the harmony. However, when this one man told his parents about it, his father allegedly punched him in the face and kicked him out of the home, according to the missionary's account. In this case, to disrupt the

² Michelle A. Vu, "Mission Leader: Why So Few Christians in Japan?" *The Christian Post* (May 8, 2010). Online: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/mission-leaderwhy-so-few-christians-in-japan.html>.

harmony in such a bold fashion truly cost this man everything and made him a social outcast. Many missionaries laud him as a brave man who is simply being persecuted for his bold faith. But one must also question whether this is an unavoidable consequence of being a Christian in Japan, or if it is instead a critical methodological flaw of how the gospel of Christ, and the actions of believers, are being presented in Japan.

Crucial to questioning this approach are Japan's traditions, which are deeply rooted in religions such as Buddhism and Confucian thought. One of Japan's major holidays is the Obon festival (お盆). It is held during the peak of summer and is believed to be a time when one's ancestors leave the spirit realm in order to return to the earth. Families flock to their respective family graves to which their ancestors are believed to return. To briefly summarize, they "welcome" the spirits back and guide them home, often by lighting a flame outside their house. Families will often "speak" to their ancestors and update them on the affairs.³ They will clean the family grave and, at the end of the festival, guide their ancestors back to the spirit realm. This is a very important holiday for many Japanese families, especially for the elders of the families. However, it is also inseparably tied to Buddhism through Urabon-e (盂蘭盆会), an event that honors a tale of spiritual admonishment from which Obon was adapted.⁴

This creates a huge conflict for many new Japanese Christians, as they wish to honor God and no longer really believe that the spirits of the dead return to earth as the story is told in Buddhist beliefs. However, by rejecting this festival, one can also be seen as rejecting their family altogether and dishonoring their ancestors. This could lead to one losing their chance to

³ Amélie Geeraert, "Obon: the Japanese Tradition of Visiting the Graves of Ancestors," *Kokoro Media* (June 15, 2020). Online: <https://kokoro-jp.com/culture/380/>.

⁴ Kenjo Igarashi, "Meaning of Urabon Shouryoudana," *Nichiren Buddhist Church* (July 12, 2017). Online: <https://sacramentonichirenchurch.org/meaning-of-urabon-shouryoudana/>.

share the Gospel with their family, or worse, becoming an outcast much like the man mentioned earlier. Obon was a common topic during interviews as a prime example of conflict between Christianity and Japanese culture. One missionary shared the story of a time that he was speaking with a young woman about embracing Christianity. While he was sharing the Gospel with her, her mother approached and said something along the lines of “so you’re just going to abandon me at my grave?” It is safe to say that there was little discussion to be had after that. Another opportunity was lost in an instant.

There are distinctly harsh social tensions in this area that are quite foreign to the rest of the world. Many Japanese walk away from the faith for this very reason. However, some persist in their faith despite the pressure exerted by their family and friends’ expectations. Some even got their mother’s blessing to pursue Christianity, despite their differences in belief. Sadly, that form of healthy compromise is still very rare. Evangelists must be cautious not to push too hard in this area: Japanese Christians should still be able to honor their families and ancestors. This is crucial to their way of life. However, this should be done without directly adhering to or relying upon the spiritualist beliefs of the Buddhist teachings of Obon. When interviewed, most missionaries said that they still actively encouraged their Japanese brothers and sisters to go home during Obon and spend time with their families, even if they did not engage in every tradition that their family partook in due to their new beliefs. It is a very crucial time as well as a great opportunity for Japanese Christians to cautiously share these newfound beliefs with their families, as the discussion of spirits and the afterlife is commonplace during this time. It can be a way to carefully introduce new ideas into the conversation without abruptly disrupting the familial harmony.

As Jon Cole, current missionary to Japan, said during his interview, “in Japan, rules often replace relationships.”⁵ For many Japanese people, their relationships with others are defined more by societal rules and expectations than by the thoughts and desires of the person. Many relationships, including romantic and familial relationships, are extremely formal and frequently lack emotional expression. For some this is a sign of respect. For others it is simply a preference that they are more comfortable with keeping things formal, as it makes it easier to maintain harmony. That said, it is a stark difference from how non-Japanese cultures perceive relationships and love. This can be a huge barrier for many missionaries looking to spread the Gospel. Many young people, if asked if they have ever said “*aishiteru*” (愛してる), which means “I love you,” to their parents, will say that they have only said it once or twice, if at all. They find it far too embarrassing or personal to say such a personal thing, even to their own parents. They prefer the more formal “*suki desu*” (好きです) or “*daisuke*,” which mean “I like you” or “I really like you.” These are much simpler and hold less weight. In one social experiment, one man even confessed that the only time he had ever told his wife “I love you” was on their wedding day!⁶

While this could be written off by some as a simple cultural quirk, it is a symptom of a larger issue, especially in light of ministry, as it can be a far greater threat to one’s faith than many missionaries realize. Jon Cole did not state that “rules often affect relationships,” even though that is also true. He said “rules often *replace* relationships,” which means so much more.⁷ This defines a great barrier to faith, as well as a great need for the Gospel, that lies within the

⁵ Jon Cole, Benjamin Highsmith, “Thoughts on Mission in Japan,” (November 4, 2022).

⁶ Jesse Ogn, "Japanese People Call Their Parents to Say "I Love You"," *YouTube* (November 30, 2022). Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wjd2fqSPWtI>.

⁷ Jon Cole, “Thoughts on Mission in Japan.”

familial structure in Japan. It has already been displayed in some of the extreme cases detailed earlier. It is a great example of how deeply rooted ideology infiltrates even the closest relationships in Japan, making for a dichotomy that is perplexing to say the least.

While the discussion up to this point has argued that rules replace relationships, the Japanese family appears to go against this argument at first glance. Family is of the utmost importance in Japan. In fact, it is generally regarded as one of the most important and invaluable things in a Japanese person's life. However, their approach to romance is far different than what we know. Relationships tend to quickly lead to a settled family life. Rules and expectations, guided by a sense of familial duty, once again slowly replace genuine relationships. Whether or not the relationship began as a romantic one, it often ends up as a formal one. Husbands and wives begin to sleep in separate beds, lose intimacy, or even live in different cities. "The man's job and children's education (become so important) that they largely take precedence over everything else."⁸ It is seen as the woman's duty to raise her children well, and the father's duty to provide for the family as a whole. Children are expected to work hard and perform well in school in order to have a more promising future. This can often lead to separated families, as fathers move elsewhere to pursue more lucrative jobs while the family stays at home so that the child doesn't have to attend a different school. If this lifestyle is carried on for long enough, the family can be reduced to little more than a "legal unit," each effectively leading their own lives while still claiming to be a family.⁹

Of course, this form of lifestyle, often encouraged by Japan's societal norms and expectations, is not without its consequences. While divorce rates are still lower in Japan than

⁸ Jon Patton, Benjamin Highsmith, "Thoughts on Mission in Japan, Part 2," (November 30, 2022).

⁹ Ibid.

most nations, infidelity rates in relationships and marriages are much higher. Not all sources fully agree, but an estimated 15 to 38 percent of people in Japan will admit that they have cheated on their partner at least once¹⁰. Statistics seem to argue that most Japanese men have cheated while in pursuit of sexual pleasure, whereas most Japanese women look for deeper emotional attachment.¹¹ It becomes painfully evident that the separation which many Japanese families experience leads to problems that only further complicate already-broken relationships. The response varies between relationships, but the true tragedy of this situation is that most married partners seem to view infidelity as insignificant or trivial. Some even claim that it is beneficial to their marriage.¹²

From this lifestyle of separation comes a more recent movement: the idea of *sotsukon*, or “graduating from marriage,” in which couples who have successfully raised their children remain married but choose to lead separate lives in their old age.¹³ While this lifestyle does not necessarily equate to infidelity, many Japanese couples do separate and, in the long term, end up living lives as if they were divorced, whether or not they ever legally separated. Either way, the idea of *sotsukon* and the high infidelity rates are both serious signs of trouble within the Japanese familial structure.

¹⁰ Alice Preat, "Why do 84 Percent of Women in Japan Think Cheating is Healthy?" *Metropolis Japan* (August 4, 2022). Online: <https://metropolisjapan.com/why-does-84-percent-of-women-in-japan-think-cheating-is-healthy/>.

¹¹ Naho Kimura, Ayami Kaji, Akane Irifune, Hayeon Suh, and Marisa Motomura, "Infidelity in Romantic Relationships among University Students in Japan." (January 2021): 3.

¹² Alice Preat, "Why do 84 Percent of Women in Japan Think Cheating is Healthy?"

¹³ Jenni Marsh and Junko Ogura, "Graduating from marriage in Japan," *CNN* (May 4, 2016). Online: <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/03/asia/sotsukon-couples-living-apart-together-in-japan/index.html>.

One might wonder how all of these rules, statistics, and ideologies are relevant to Christianity in Japan. Well, within the Gospel, God is frequently referred to as a father, and many use the parallel of a family as a way to describe the relationship between God, the church, and His people. However, this message of a loving father may not be well received by those who have had absent fathers or other broken relationships. The idea of Christianity being a relationship can be seen as off-putting, or even scary, for those Japanese people who have had a bad experience within their families. They may either struggle to engage in a deeper relationship with God or possibly even see God as manipulative or absent if those sharing the Gospel fail to explain the divinity of Christ and instead simply compare the relationship to that of a father and his child, one that can easily be warped by one's personal experiences.

Separation and infidelity being so common in Japan weakens the ideal of a familial relationship with Christ. It causes indifference and distrust to the idea of a deeper spiritual relationship. The idea that one need not be loyal to one person, or God, is dangerous to both one's faith and one's personal relationships. Believing that one can simply walk away from a relationship while assuming that it is still ongoing is also harmful. It can lead Christianity to become yet another routine. Christian discipline then becomes one more set of rules to follow instead of a relationship that leads to discipleship. Unfortunately, Japanese families have been becoming more prone to issues that are commonplace in the average American relationship. While it is usually looked down upon as most distasteful in Japanese society, the divorce rate has been increasing in Japan.¹⁴ These factors are perpetuated by the societal pressures of Japan. Pressure to work hard, even to the point of overwork and leaving one's family, pressure to get

¹⁴ Akiko Watabe and David R. Hibbard, "The Influence of Authoritarian and Authoritative Parenting on Children's Academic Achievement Motivation: A Comparison between the United States and Japan." *NORTH AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY* 16: 360.

married and have children in order to be viewed as successful, and pressure to remain in a marriage that many enter into hastily all lead to broken marriages in Japan.

While this is not necessarily something a missionary or a Japanese Christian would be wise to suddenly and vehemently condemn, one should not be dissuaded from considering the issue at hand: it is a telling sign of a need for Christ in Japan. However, one must contextualize the message of Christianity to fit these beliefs so that Japanese will be more readily accepting of it. Perhaps, once one learns of the love of Christ, they can use such a model to be a better parent or spouse. So far, this discussion has summarized some of the great barriers to Christianity within Japan. It all seems to point to a simple conclusion: Japan is very different from what most people of the western world know, as well as what most missionaries know. This means that what we are used to very well may not work in Japan. Thus, we must adapt, or more so properly contextualize, the Gospel and our Christian beliefs in such a way that the Japanese people will hear, understand, and receive it.

How Japanese society perceives Christianity.

So then, a good question is, how do the Japanese people perceive Christianity? Japan's perception has evolved greatly throughout the years, but it is currently far more positive than it has been in a long time. Sadly, that doesn't mean very much. For centuries Japan's relationship with Christianity has been one filled with fear, apprehensiveness, and sometimes even hatred. After being introduced to Japan in 1549, Christianity was subsequently banned altogether in 1640.¹⁵ Some so-called hidden Christians persisted, though the Christian faith that emerged

¹⁵ K. Asakawa, "Christianity in Japan," *The Atlantic* (May 1907). Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1907/05/christianity-in-japan/638911/>.

when Japan re-opened in 1854 is a far cry from the Christianity that we know. Since then, Christianity has failed to ever truly take root within Japan. Much of this is caused by the ongoing notion that Christianity is at odds with the Japanese way of life and that it should not be accepted into the culture; a notion that has been passed down since before Christian practices were once again legalized in Japan. However, this is not the only thing that has been pushing back against the spread of Christianity.

On March 20, 1995, tragedy struck. The doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo launched a coordinated terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway system. Five packages containing sarin, a deadly chemical nerve agent, were placed on subway trains and subsequently punctured; 12 people died in the attacks, and nearly 3,800 were injured.¹⁶ All of Japan was shaken by the attack. The cult's leader, later found to be Shoko Ashahara, "frequently preached about a coming Armageddon, which he describes as a global conflict that would, among other things, destroy Japan with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons."¹⁷ The cult's name quickly became synonymous with religious extremism and violence. The problem with this was that the cult was a hybrid offshoot of several popular religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Christianity.¹⁸ While he was the leader of the cult, Ashahara even frequently "claimed to be the reincarnated Jesus Christ."¹⁹ His perceived close associations with Christianity and Christian beliefs brought a

¹⁶ Kyle B. Olsen, "Aum Shinrikyo: Once and Future Threat?" *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 5 (July 1999): 513-514.

¹⁷ Olsen, 515.

¹⁸ Erica Simons. "Faith, Fanaticism, and Fear: Aum Shinrikyo--The Birth and Death of a Terrorist Organization," *Forensic Examiner* 15 (Spring 2006): 37-45.

¹⁹ Olsen, 515.

great deal of negative attention to the Japanese Christian community, as well as foreign missionaries.

Prior to the attacks many negative preconceptions regarding Christianity had begun to fade, and, while Japan was still far from welcoming to Christianity at the time, it was somewhat more accepted. However, the attacks by Aum Shinrikyo served only to further reinforce the idea of Christianity as a scary, distasteful thing, much like a cult. A study conducted in 1994 shows this: “many Japanese are intolerant of any strongly held religious faith. . .approximately 50 percent of the respondents felt negative toward religion in general.”²⁰ These statistics came from so-called “religiously apathetic” Japanese, so the attacks that came the following year undoubtedly only served to raise these numbers after the event.²¹

As of the writing of this thesis, nearly 28 years have passed since the Aum Shinrikyo sarin attack. Much of the younger generation was not even born during this era, and even fewer have a clear memory of it. While the event is beginning to fade from the public eye, its impact is still deeply rooted within Japan, leading many Japanese to be hesitant to embrace Christianity. Alongside those who are hesitant to believe due to disrupting the harmony, much like was discussed earlier, some will cite groups like Aum Shinrikyo and the Jehovah’s Witnesses when expressing their hesitance to consider Christianity. Note, however, that while most will not express their thoughts directly, these ideas most certainly contribute to the single most common publicly expressed sentiment that Japanese people hold towards Christianity: indifference.

Most Japanese people, when asked, will state that they do not, or no longer, hold any ill will against Christianity. Modern trends and the emergence of younger generations have

²⁰ Tokihisa Sumimoto, "RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROBLEMS IN JAPAN: BACKGROUND AND CURRENT PROSPECTS," *The International Journal of Peace Studies* 5 (Autumn/Winter 2000).

²¹ Ibid.

seemingly produced a more progressive, tolerant audience when it comes to one's religious beliefs and lifestyle. However, once asked about their interest in Christianity, this tolerance and acceptance takes a different form. You will discover a blunt trend: while they do not mind its existence, they are still not remotely interested in participation in the faith.

[W]hile more than 99% of Japanese people are not Christians, this does not mean that they dislike Christianity, or have a negative image of the religion. Far from it. In fact, it is fair to say that many Japanese people are quite familiar with (Christianity). . . they do not critically reject Christian teachings after thorough study; they are simply not interested and never bother to find out.²²

While Christianity has certainly had its ups and downs in Japan, this one statement almost perfectly summarizes the perception that most Japanese people have of Christianity. They are neither scared nor scornful of Christianity, nor are they necessarily enamored. Most simply are not interested, or at all concerned for that matter.

In fact, most Japanese are not interested in religion in general. The question still remains whether the proclaimed indifference is really disinterest or if it is a politely concealed disdain much like what was shown in the previously-cited 1994 study. This disinterest may come from many different sources, but the primary cause is undeniably the way of Japanese thinking, itself. "Japanese people value human relationships more than truth and principle," Michelle Vu argued in her article about why there are such few Christians in Japan. Much of this argument relates back to harmony, and the fear of imposing one's beliefs upon others. A claim is made that this is why Japan's growth lags behind China and South Korea when it comes to Christianity. This is because they "make more of truth or principle than human relationships," whereas Japan is less "principle-oriented" in this sense.²³ This is not to say that Japanese people are unscrupulous or

²² Ishikawa Akito, "'A Little Faith: Christianity and the Japanese,'" *Nippon.com* (November 22, 2019). Online: <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-topics/g00769/a-little-faith-christianity-and-the-japanese.html>.

²³ Michelle A. Vu, "Mission Leader: Why So Few Christians in Japan?"

do not follow rules, the recently discussed topics should make that much clear. Instead, this argument shows all the more how most of those rules are defined by social relationships and the behavior of people instead of by a more clear-cut definition of right and wrong.

One of the other great causes of religious disinterest when it comes to the Japanese way of thought is their idea of right and wrong, which is inherently different from other cultures. Not only is it different, but it is different in such a way that many Japanese people are neither concerned about nor interested in the afterlife. While this may seem contradictory to many of their religion-based traditions, events such as Obon do not require direct association with a religion, despite spiritual implications. Japanese culture is one of many contradictions, and this is one of those contradictions. Most, in practice, appear highly religious. However, in reality, most do not associate themselves with a religion nor are they concerned about religious ideas, even if much of their culture and family life actually revolves around them.

Most also do not see any need for salvation or forgiveness of sins. In fact, there is no direct equivalent for the term “sin” in Japanese, nor do many Japanese have any awareness of a condition like that of “being in sin.” The closest term most commonly acknowledged as an equivalent to “sin” that is recognized within Japanese culture is “*tsumi*” (罪). This term, in Japanese culture and, primarily, the Shinto religion, represents a form of pollution or uncleanness. While *tsumi* can be directly related to one person, it can also be considered a communal issue, as it brings “chaos to both the universe and the community,” which once again points to Japan’s focus on communal behavior as well as their emphasis on relationships.²⁴

²⁴ Nic Crook, "CAC Articles – A Japanese Understanding of Sin," *Brisbane School of Theology*, n.d. Online: <https://bst.qld.edu.au/cac-articles-a-japanese-understanding-of-sin>.

This is simply where the differences between sin and *tsumi* begin. Most Japanese people believe that every person is born pure. Shinto beliefs state that humans are “born pure, and sharing in the divine soul.”²⁵ *Tsumi* is something that is encountered throughout one’s life. In many cases, *tsumi* is believed to be “beyond the control of individual human beings” due to it being “thought of as being caused by evil spirits.”²⁶ As a result, many Japanese people aren’t expected to be held personally accountable for this, nor is purification a matter of personal purification. Oftentimes, Shinto priests will perform purification rituals that “cleanse” large groups of people.²⁷ This does not necessarily amount to forgiveness, either. It is simply the “cleansing of a ‘dirty heart.’”²⁸

This concept as a whole greatly challenges the spread of Christianity in Japan. Most Japanese people do not feel as if they have a need for God and do not tend to understand our explanation of why God would be needed even less, due to cultural differences. If one were to share the Gospel in Japan by using western concepts, it might have some moments like the conversation below. Note that this conversation is fictional and has been made especially blunt and stereotypical in order to be more easily understood. They should not be used as a guide to sharing the Gospel in real life, nor is it necessarily the way a Japanese person would respond.

Person X: “Would you like to hear about why you need God in your life?”

Person Y: “I do not necessarily know why I would need God.”

Person X: “Do you not want your sins forgiven? The gift of God is to forgive your

²⁵ “Purity in Shinto,” *BBC* (October 30, 2009.) Online:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/purity.shtml#findoutmore>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nic Crook, “CAC Articles – A Japanese Understanding of Sin.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

sins.”

Person Y: “...what is sin? I do not recall sinning.”

This lack of a sin concept makes sharing the Gospel especially difficult. *Tsumi* cannot be used as a direct comparison to sins as it is largely a Shinto belief and can be cleansed without forgiveness. However, the concept of sin itself is one that many Japanese will have a hard time believing in. They will usually brush it off with the same indifference to which they brush off most religions, seeing as they do not comprehend any need. Considering that most people become Christians through conviction of sin, which eventually leads to repentance, this indifference, disinterest, and lack of conviction is most concerning. It is unlikely for this general indifference to change without any action to better adapt and contextualize the Gospel in such a way that the people of Japan would better understand and accept its concepts. This will later be discussed in more depth in the last and most important part of this thesis.

Japanese Christian beliefs and perceptions.

Before finally approaching the topic of how Christianity could be approached in such a way that, within proper context, it could benefit Japan, let us look at how Japanese Christians are currently practicing their faith and how they themselves perceive Christianity. There are few better ways to understand the state of Christianity within a culture than to observe natives who believe in Christ and see how they live their lives. Within Japan, as in life, both good examples and bad examples may be seen. Signs of growth and signs of deterioration. Let us take a closer look.

Considering how different Japanese culture is, one could reasonably expect the manifestation of the modern church in Japan to be very different from what we know in the west. However, surprisingly, there aren't many differences. Most Japanese churches meet primarily on

Sundays for worship services. They sing primarily western songs that have been translated into Japanese, have a worship team much like many contemporary churches do, and have a pastor who preaches a sermon to those in attendance. However, some missionaries are trying to change this piece by piece. Take Jon Cole for example.

We can't just give (Japanese Christians) one to two hours on Sunday of them sitting and listening to a sermon, singing some songs, then going home and expect their faith to thrive when they're walking amongst a majority of lost people every day. People who live out of fear.²⁹

This statement came out during an interview. It was in response to the question "What changes would be beneficial for the Japanese church?" Jon Cole quickly provided a solution to the core issue that he pointed out.

Overall, the greatest challenge is to get Japanese Christians to, as Jon Cole worded it, "buy in" to their faith.³⁰ As discussed earlier, most of Japanese society values relationships more than it does correctness. This has been witnessed firsthand in the failure of many western-style Christian churches when they fail to retain Japanese Christians merely with sermons and worship sessions. Jon Cole feels that the missionaries and church leaders in his area are coming closer to a conclusion, though the plan still needs time. "There needs to be a greater emphasis on personal relationships for discipleship. Small groups can be really helpful, but very few members will buy in; we need to emphasize community."³¹ He goes on to argue that, for Christianity to take root in Japan, the practice of Christianity needs to evolve more to look like the early church. Instead of one meeting, it needs to be made into an everyday, seven days a week practice. The people *are*

²⁹ Jon Cole, "Thoughts on Mission in Japan."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

the church. This, combined with potent messages that have immediate applications, has drawn in the small number of deeply dedicated Japanese Christians that attend his church.

While it is wonderful to see some churches making progress and witnessing growth, this sadly is not the case for many churches, nor is it enough to change how many Japanese Christians approach their faith. Many were drawn to attend church not so much from an interest in the Gospel itself, but from the things surrounding it. Yutaka Nakamura, a Japanese Christian, shares how Gospel music got him into church. “There’re many Japanese who became Christians because of Gospel music. Gospel music made me interested to go to church in the first place. I started to read the Bible because I wanted to understand the song lyrics and eventually became Christian.”³² Similarly, when asked about her reason for becoming a Christian, Yuki Sakita answered “every time I sing a hymn with people together, I’m so in a state of euphoria and naturally come to think that- I do need Jesus Christ. That’s my reason to be Christian.”³³ These people are proclaiming Christians now, and there is much reason to rejoice as a result. It is a good thing that Gospel music and other topics are bringing Japanese people in to hear the Gospel. However, their understanding seems to still be much more grounded in a momentary feeling than an ongoing relationship with Christ. In order to truly develop faithful followers of Christ, church leaders must understand the need to put an emphasis on more than just the emotion of the moment on a Sunday morning.

That does not imply, however, that all Japanese Christians are this way. Many are truly pursuing the will of God and are convicted that they should be living for Christ. This segment will take a more extensive look at Japanese Christians and their attitude towards Christianity

³² Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan," *YouTube* (October 19, 2020). Online: <https://youtu.be/ZW1Hn8DxZ9s>.

³³ *Ibid.*

with many direct quotations, as this ties everything that has been said thus far together. In order to understand the future of Japanese Christianity, one must first understand the beliefs of those who are Japanese Christians today, their perception of Christianity, and how they think it applies to Japan as a whole. There is no better way to grasp the state of Christianity in Japan and its impact on Japanese society than straight from the testimony of those who are living it.

Eiko Tanaka, a member of Japan Kingdom Church, is an excellent example of a person who appears to be living for Christ and expressing a good fundamental understanding of a relationship with Christ. Throughout her interview she spoke a great deal about the peace that God provides. Towards the end, she stated that “whatever happens in my life, I feel like there’ll always be something warm in my heart like love, pleasure, or peace. This may sound fake, but I always have happiness because of my faith. That’s a big deal to me.”³⁴ Peace beyond understanding that is found in one’s faith is an excellent example of what a faithful Christian can hope to experience. Yuki Tsujii, a young Japanese man who was raised in a Christian home, shared in an interview that he was able to “live. . .life with a strong principle. I can have a consistent standpoint and confidence in my decisions. I can be confident in my actions, which is a big deal to me.”³⁵ While he encountered some challenges to his faith while in school, he still expressed that he deeply appreciated the confidence that being established in God granted him.

In an interview a young man, named Kanki Matsuyama, shares how he stepped away from the faith and later came back. “My parents have both been Christians since I was born. . .but looking back now, I had no interest in Christianity. When I was traveling around the U.S.. .

³⁴ Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan."

³⁵ Ibid.

.I met so many kind and great people. . .and most of them happened to be Christians.”³⁶ He went on to tell a story of a man he met who helped him and eventually invited him to a church. After finishing his account of the tale, he said “if I didn’t meet him and go to church, I wouldn’t be a Christian now.”³⁷ This kind of story would be familiar to many Japanese Christians. Quite a few Japanese Christians came to know Christ while they were overseas and encountered more foreign Christians. Eiko Tanaka shared her memory of her experience in an interview: “When I was living in Canada a few years ago, I met many Christians there. They had something I didn’t have, like love or a kind heart. And they were so nice to me. I just wondered where it was coming from and then, I visited a local church and I was moved. My tears just didn’t stop and I genuinely felt the presence of God for the first time.”³⁸

These experiences express that, while many Japanese churches emulate a western church both in practices and theology, Christianity in Japan is still different from Christianity elsewhere. Shinji Matsutani, the chief editor for a Japanese Christian publication service, shared in an interview that “Japanese who got attracted to Christianity abroad, when they come back to Japan and go to church, I often hear that they’re disappointed a lot because Christianity in Japan is just too different for them. This actually happens a lot.”³⁹ One issue that stems from this problem is that, in most instances, you will hear tales of Japanese parents taking their child to church when they are younger, but never directly sharing their faith and explaining the Gospel to their child,

³⁶ Nobita, "What Being Christian Is Like In Japan," *YouTube* (October 19, 2020). Online: <https://youtu.be/ZW1Hn8DxZ9s>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan."

³⁹ Nobita, "What Being Christian Is Like In Japan."

much like it was with Matsuyama's story. On top of this, schools host many club activities on Sundays, which only adds to the social pressures young Japanese people often face. Quite often this keeps them from routinely attending church and expressing their faith publicly.

Yuki Tsujii shared that "people often give me a weird look when I say I always have something to do on Sundays."⁴⁰ Jef Linscott, a missionary in Japan, discussed how "(going to church on Sundays) can be a big hurdle in Japan," a Christian student could invite his friends to go with him, and "they couldn't go there in the end because it was only on Sundays and they have club activities on the weekends."⁴¹ Thus, an opportunity to grow and spread the Gospel is lost. Many Japanese Christians also face an opposite pressure to be faithful to the church and abandon their clubs and activities in order to attend church. This further limits the number of people willing to remain involved in a church and presents a challenge to Christians who want to excitedly share the love of Christ with their friends.

Japanese people frequently struggle to even begin a conversation about Christianity with their peers, for numerous reasons. Matsutani shared that he thinks many Japanese see Christianity as "Scrupulous, strict, dark, and scary."⁴² Tak Nakamine, who leads a Christian metal band by the name of Imari tones, shared how he was called weird for being openly Christian when he was younger: "Living in Japan, people do not take my religion seriously. I have to deal with that all the time in my life. They'd say, like, 'but you're Japanese, so you should do the same thing as us.'"⁴³ Natsu, another Christian musician, says much the same

⁴⁰ Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

“They are so afraid that they might be brainwashed. . . people assume that religious people must be mentally weak and that's why they have to rely on religion.”⁴⁴ Tsujii quite bluntly states that “In Japan, it's hard to be openly Christian because you don't wanna be ostracized or disliked.”⁴⁵ Many Japanese Christians experienced hesitancy, fear, and pushback from strangers, friends, and family alike when they were younger. Dr. Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom says that he believes this is because “the Aum Shinrikyo cult did ‘that.’ So it is quite hard to express your religious beliefs or faith openly. It is common to see Japanese giving up being Christian because of (their) family's disapproval. In Japan, people care about other people too much in that sense,” which only serves to echo the ideas presented earlier.⁴⁶

However, some have had a different experience. Matsuyama says that “I personally don't think Japanese have a bad image (of Christianity). I think they're simply indifferent, you know. It's understandable that Japan is an irreligious country,” implying how it is more of an issue with Japan's culture than Christianity itself; Christianity is not a bad thing, it is just especially hard for religion to take root in Japan.⁴⁷ Linscott agrees that it is largely a matter of culture. “People think like “it has nothing to do with me.” Japanese people might associate it with a positive word like beautiful, pure, or bright, but in the end, the religion seems so irrelevant to them. It seems so “non-Japanese” that they cannot relate.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Nobita, "What Being Christian Is Like In Japan."

⁴⁸ Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan."

In another interview, Makoto, a Japanese Christian of 13 years, shared how “at my workplace, I don’t feel difficulty because I’ve already told my coworkers that I am a believer.”⁴⁹ He continues to share how it was initially scary to tell them, but that once he had he did not encounter many problems relating to his religious beliefs. A great struggle when it comes to Christianity in Japan is that “we Japanese people always think about how other people will see us.”⁵⁰ Stories, like the ones above, of Japanese people who live comfortably despite sharing their beliefs and who discuss Christianity’s relationship are evidence of a trend for Christianity in Japan; it is rarely the case that Christianity is perceived as inherently bad. More often than not it is the culture of Japan, between the need for harmony, a fear of forced differentiation, a desire for mutual respect, and the fear of cults, that stops a Japanese person from entertaining Christianity, as it is perceived as foreign and at odds with being Japanese.

So, what if there were a way to change that? Nakamine, when asked about Japanese morality in comparison to Christianity, said “I want them (the Japanese) realize that it (Christianity) is actually so close to the Japanese mentality” in reference to the kindness, respect, selflessness, and morals that many people show in Japan (Nobita). At the end of his interview, Jef Linscott discusses an idea that relates to the very core purpose of this thesis.

Japan’s Christianity sticks to the old western style, but Uchimura believed it should be localized. Let me quote his words: “Bushidō is the finest product of Japan. But Bushidō itself does not have the ability to save Japan. Christianity grafted upon Bushidō will be the finest product the world will see and it will save not only Japan, but the whole world.” So I have hope for Japan and Japanese men.⁵¹

⁴⁹ David Song, "Christianity from a Japanese's Point of View Part 2!" *YouTube* (September 18, 2019). Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBCfy42ebio>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Nobita, "Being Christian In Japan."

Kanzo Uchimura was a Japanese Christian of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who “did not reject the Christian church as such but developed a non-sacramental, largely non-liturgical mode of church life.”⁵² He went on to found the now-famous non-church Christian movement that took the focus of Christianity beyond the church. While his movement might not be the focus of modern Christianity, the idea that is presented by the quote Linscott shared holds true to this day.

How Christianity, when proper contextualized, could benefit Japan.

Christianity and the Japanese way are very similar. However, this is hard to discern when Christianity is still presented in a westernized manner. Much like Linscott and Uchimura argued, the best opportunity for Christianity to take root in Japan is to have it be properly localized and contextualized regarding Japanese culture. It presents morals that closely align with Japanese beliefs, such as living in harmony, showing mutual respect, living at peace with all, and honoring one’s family. However, as long as this is presented in a western manner both in presentation and practice, it will likely not take root. Encouraging overtly bold proclamations of faith, lifestyles centered around weekly group meetings, and refusal to participate in Japanese traditions will turn the vast majority of Japanese people away from Christianity, and those few who do adhere to it are likely to suffer some harm to their personal lives. Tragically, much of this is simply dismissed as the inevitable “persecution” that Christians will experience. However, such persecution could theoretically be avoided if Christianity was contextualized to coexist with Japanese culture.

In the mid-1500s these practices of contextualization and contrafaction were already being applied to Christianity by the Japanese people. This was during the time of the Jesuit

⁵² Richard H. Drummond, "Uchimura, Kanzo," *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (1998): 687.

mission to Japan, through which Christianity was first introduced to the nation. One of the ways they did this was by adapting worship to the local vernacular. According to Makoto Harris

Takao:

Japanese Christians asserted their own sense of *Kirishitan* identity through music, setting vernacular texts to existing forms of Japanese vocalization in the 16th century. Indeed, these performance practices were not only instances of vernacularization, but also a development of traditions that are best understood as truly Japanese.⁵³

Early on, many Japanese people converted to this adapted Christianity before persecution came.

Sadly, much of that progress was lost when Christianity was outlawed, and Christians were forced to go into hiding. Those who went into hiding became known as “*Kakure Kirishitan*,” or hidden Christians. After losing the missionaries who guided them, their practices evolved into what is nearly a unique religion of its own, and the remaining population of *Kakure Kirishitan* is declining.⁵⁴ So, tragically, nearly all of the progress of localization has since been lost.

The point of mentioning this is to briefly highlight the fact that people have started to contextualize Christianity in Japan in the past to great positive response by much of the populace. While the Japan of old is a far cry from modern day Japan, many aspects of Japanese culture remain relatively the same. Thus, this concept of contextualization should, in theory, still find success if applied properly today. With this in mind, what should be the focus of contextualized Christianity? There are three primary foci highlighted in the following section: living peaceably with all, loving one another, and maintaining one common goal. While these concepts may sound inherently Christian, they have the potential to also become inherently

⁵³ Makoto Harris Takao, “‘In their own way’: contrafactual practices in Japanese,” *Early Music* 47 (2019): 183.

⁵⁴ Linda Sieg, “Japan's ageing ‘Hidden Christians’ fear they may be their religion's last generation,” *Reuters* (November 14, 2019). Online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-japan-hidden-christians-feature/japans-ageing-hidden-christians-fear-they-may-be-their-religions-last-generation-idUSKBN1XO324>.

Japanese by contributing to the Japanese concepts of harmony, obedience, community, and conformity.

The first and arguably most important aspect of contextualizing Christianity for Japan should be an emphasis on Christianity's encouragement of peace and harmony. As long as Christianity is perceived as a disruptor and inherent threat to the harmony of Japan, it will not take root. In order to change this perception, Christians have to be able to explain why Christianity is peaceful in a way that Japanese natives will understand. This can be done without compromising the Gospel message as the Bible commands Christians to live peacefully. Core to this argument is Romans 12:14-21. One excerpt of the passage states the following: "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." This passage directly states that Christians should "live in harmony with one another." However, many overlook how, just as Christians are called to live in harmony with one another, they are also commanded to "live peaceably with all."

This concept, encouraged as a core ideology for all Christians, should be given special emphasis within the context of Japanese culture. If Japanese Christians were to adhere to this ideology, their change of lifestyle would quickly become evident to those around them. If approached cautiously, this could theoretically create an opportunity to share God's Word without disrupting the harmony. In fact, God encourages believers to live in harmony with everyone as much as we are able. As Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (Matt 5:9)." Christianity is neither a violent nor a disruptive religion; it encourages just the opposite; Christians should act as peacemakers

that bring together people from all walks of life. Yet again, this lines up with the Japanese ideas of harmony and respect.

An even greater challenge presented by the Romans 12 passage that many Japanese people would likely find intriguing is that Christians are called to be “honorable in the sight of all.” Contrary to the beliefs of many, Christianity is not just for those who are weak nor is an excuse for those who cannot handle reality. Christianity is a faith that encourages honor and courage in the face of adversity. Its response is peacefulness, patience, and kindness. In Romans 12:13, just preceding the earlier passages, it entreats us to “seek to show hospitality,” which is also important in Japanese culture. James 3:13, 17-18 says “By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. . .the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” The great message of this is that harmony is not maintained out of fear, it is born out of wisdom and one’s own joy. It is the fruits of one’s growth and it creates honor for those who rest in the peace of God.

Peace, while it is a wonderful thing, struggles to exist without love. This is where the Christian concept diverges from the Japanese way somewhat. However, that does not mean that they cannot coexist without destroying each other. Japan maintains harmony and peace simply because that is the expectation and duty of every Japanese person. It is the Japanese way. Christianity takes it one step further, saying that peace is driven by love for one another. As Colossians 3:14-15 says, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.” This provides a very direct message: love “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” While harmony and love might be able to exist separately for a time, love is the key

ingredient that brings everything together in harmony. What better way is there to experience this love than through God? As 1 John 4:7-8 says, “beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because *God is love*.” Once we accept the love of God and abide in Him, “love (is) perfected with us,” and through perfect love everything is bound together in perfect harmony (1 John 4:17).

Biblical love also stands out from Japan’s more stoic approach in that it does not come from a place of fear. Many Japanese, when asked why they are hesitant to discuss Christianity, or why they work so hard to maintain harmony with those around them, say that it is because they are afraid. Whether it be that they are afraid of judgment, criticism, or being socially outcast, they say that it is a scary thing. However, those who are planted in Christian love maintain harmony through love, and “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love (1 John 4:18).”

That said, the biblical concept of love and Christian behavior still encourages respect and submission to authority, which aligns much more closely with Japanese culture. Take 1 Peter 2:13-14 and 16-17 for example:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. . . Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

By emphasizing the Lord’s command to submit to authority yet act out of love, respect, and honor instead of fear, the biblical concept of love should be able to coexist with Japanese culture quite easily while encouraging a healthier approach to maintaining harmony.

Finally, the last of the primary foci and, arguably the most important, is providing one common goal. Much of Japan has a relatively rigid societal structure that is defined by roles. For example, as discussed earlier, the father is expected to provide for the family, whether or not that removes him from his children's life and the mother is supposed to raise the children even if it frequently comes at the cost of lost intimacy with her husband. Similarly in the Japanese workplace and society as a whole, each person is expected to conform to their role and submit to authority in order to act as part of a whole. Sadly, many end up feeling a "lack of psychological and social well-being," as shown by prevalence of depression and suicide in Japan despite a general lack of awareness for such issues.⁵⁵ This is brought about because many of these societal expectations lack purpose beyond simply doing what needs to be done. Many of these things are done simply to make a living, maintain harmony, and improve Japanese society. However, with increasing abuse occurring in the workplace and many other chronic workplace challenges, many Japanese people are losing sight of their purpose in life.⁵⁶ Christianity, when properly applied, could change this by providing one common goal.

One of the very best examples of this can be seen in the following excerpts of 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God

⁵⁵Silva, Chikako Ozawa-de. "Suicide, Mental Resilience and Meaning in Life in Japan." *Yale Council on East Asian Studies*. April 6, 2012. <https://ceas.yale.edu/events/suicide-mental-resilience-and-meaning-life-japan> (accessed March 5, 2023).

⁵⁶ "Japan Sees Record Number of Work-Related Mental Health Disorder Cases in 2021," *nippon.com* (July 12, 2022). Online: <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01371/>.

arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

This passage represents a core aspect of the Christian faith that many overlook. It has very important implications for one's value when they walk with Christ and the church. It matches Japanese society in that the "many members," which are Christians, are all seen as parts of a greater whole. However, this passage goes further by showing how God ensures that every member has value. They are each needed, even the "parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Not only this, but God grants honor to all, not just those who are considered more important. In brief, Christianity provides a place with meaning for everyone.

There are some other Bible verses that present the benefits of finding purpose in Christ like this. Take Romans 8:28, for example, which says "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Paul, in 2 Corinthians 13:11, shares how peace might be found through sharing one common goal under Christ. "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." Not only does this encourage one common goal, but it does so with the aim of restoration. Many Japanese people fear becoming outcasts if they disrupt the harmony, but Christianity actively advocates for the

restoration of Christian brothers and sisters all while implying that peace can be maintained by everyone involved.

The three primary foci frequently overlap in the passages shared above. This is because they all point to one truer and greater truth; the truth that Jesus Christ, in the greatest act of love, lived, died, and rose again to forgive our sins. These ideas are crucial to the life of a Christian. But, for the most part, they are also in many ways core Japanese concepts. This is the most important part. Contextualization does not inherently change the message of the Gospel, it simply presents biblical concepts from the listener's perspective so that they can better understand what is being shared. While they might not necessarily be applicable in every situation with every Japanese person, the three primary foci provide Biblical examples of how one could present Christianity in a way that would be more acceptable to the average Japanese person, all while showing them that Christianity is neither extremist nor does it have to be especially disruptive. It encourages one to live with morality much like that which Japanese society encourages. Without this proper contextualization, it is highly likely that Christianity will continue to be a minority in Japan.

So, this discussion demands an answer: how could Christianity, once properly contextualized, benefit Japan? While it should be evident by now that there are ways that Christianity could potentially coexist with Japanese culture, very few direct benefits have been shown for Christianity's growth in Japan. Some potential arguments are likely already evident from earlier discussions in the thesis. However, it would still be wise to cover each and every topic as thoroughly as possible. Before diving into the topic, there is a clarification that needs to be made. These are primarily changes that must first be made within individuals' lives. While many of these arguments discuss how they would benefit Japan as a whole, these changes would

likely not occur overnight, short of some incredible revival occurring. It would take years of Christianity growing to see it have a noticeable impact on Japanese culture as a whole. However, in the meantime, many individuals could still greatly benefit from it in the exact same way and, eventually, it should be possible for Japan to benefit as a whole.

First of all, it could bring about true harmony through Christ's vision for the greater good of humanity. Core to many societal expectations in Japan, as well as one of the main things that seem to be preventing Christianity from spreading, is the idea of maintaining harmony. Converting to Christianity, or nearly any religion that is perceived as "western" or "foreign," is frequently considered too scary or risky as it will disrupt the harmony and have huge social consequences. However, when properly contextualized, Christianity actively encourages that its followers maintain harmony with all as they pursue their relationship with Christ. Converting need not be especially disruptive; while one would likely change once they accept Christ, these changes could be subtle and gradual. While one should be cautious to bow to false images, this does not mean that Japanese Christians need to fully reject their family's traditions or look scornfully upon family practices. In fact, many Japanese practices could be opportunities to slowly introduce biblical concepts of harmony and spirituality while still taking time to be with one's family and friends.

The harmony presented by the Gospel goes beyond simply conforming for conformity's sake and maintaining the harmony of fear; it encourages harmony for the sake of love and understanding. As Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Many Japanese people struggle with depression, extreme isolation, and fear of rejection. Christianity could maintain this

harmony while encouraging understanding, which could eventually lead to much more meaningful community and interpersonal relationships. If guided by this concept of love amongst discipline, society could still discipline those who are living immorally while still aiming for restoration, as shared in an earlier passage. Japanese people would no longer have to live in fear of rejection so much as they would live with a mission to spur each other to be better.

With harmony being maintained and people applying a gentle discipline that allows for restoration, this could allow for meaningful community to develop, both within churches and in the outside world. Japanese people would no longer have to keep to themselves to such a great extent out of caution, and they would be encouraged to find community and “stir one another up” to do well, instead of simply minding their own business. There would be much more opportunity for interpersonal relationships and healthy friendships without as much concern over what each person really thinks of each other. However, one must still note that the “Japanese way” of doing things is not likely to go away anytime soon. This argument is not necessarily to encourage one to ignore this and share their shortcomings openly, as it will still often lead to gossip and the potential shunning of the person. However, one can be more open with many of their thoughts and this lifestyle should encourage greater levels of encouragement and social support, nurturing a more positive environment instead of simply doing what one has to do for the sake of society as a whole.

Similarly, Christianity could benefit Japan through the healing of the broken Japanese family. The Bible clearly outlines the importance of fidelity in relationships and also shows that, while parents should make a great effort to raise their children, they should also not grow cold and neglect each other. For example, take these excerpts from 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 regarding marital intimacy:

Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. . .do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 Peter 3:7 commands husbands to “live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman.” Fulfillment of such guidance shows the importance of the presence of a husband and wife in each other’s lives. Finally, Hebrews 13:4 clearly outlines the importance of fidelity in marriage, stating that marriage should “be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” Most importantly among all of this is the emphasis on honor: a man should show honor to his wife, as well as honor their marriage commitment. Also important is the idea that infidelity and extramarital affairs defile the marriage, bringing about *tsumi* within the relationship, and allowing opportunities for evil spirits, in this case Satan, to interfere by exploiting a lack of self-control.

Regarding children, the Bible encourages parental presence and care accompanied by gentle discipline. Proverbs 22:6 instructs parents to “train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Further encouraging discipline and careful instruction by fathers is Ephesians 6:4, which says “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” While fathers should avoid provoking their children, they still should not hesitate to be active in raising them with discipline. As Proverbs 13:24 says, “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.” Altogether, passages like these show that Christianity believes that family is extremely important, much like Japanese society believes. However, Christianity goes one step further and highlights where many relationships crumble. Husbands and wives should be loyal and not neglect marital intimacy. They also need to be present, not only for each other

but also for their children, and they need to discipline their children gently, being careful not to discourage them. If Japanese families would put greater emphasis on these aspects, especially fidelity and presence overall, relationships could stand to benefit greatly from Christian ideals.

For all of these potential benefits, there is one common denominator—love. For any of these things to work, one must possess love. Love for their spouse, love for children, love for friends, and love for strangers. This is what Christianity provides to the otherwise distant disposition of many Japanese people. While a western expression of love might not necessarily fit into a Japanese lifestyle, the Christian expression of love shows through simple actions such as patience, forgiveness, and understanding. Such things bring honor to the person exercising them, and as such brings honor to their family all while perpetuating harmony in their community. Christianity need not be feared if one simply follows the common command to love one another. If Christianity brings about love and honor in relationships, Japan's culture stands to benefit greatly from such a thing.

Conclusion

In summary, after perusing the great complexities of Japanese society, Japan's cultural traditions, and the perception of religion in Japan, the statement being made is quite simple. The *goals* of Japan and Christianity are very similar. They both believe that one should be willing to make sacrifices for others, especially so for the greater good. They both believe that family is of utmost importance and to be valued over many other worldly things. Most importantly, they both believe in the importance of harmony and bringing honor to one's family and community through such a thing. The core difference is *why* they pursue these goals.

Japanese people are primarily told to honor these things out of fear. Do not be a burden, do not hinder others, avoid conflicts, and more than anything do not disrupt the harmony, lest they find themselves facing the consequences of inconveniencing someone, or worse, being shunned from society altogether. Japan's culture is one of shame. Christianity, on the other hand, tells us to honor these things out of love for others and love for God. Serve others, love others passionately, resolve all conflicts with brotherly love, and as best as you can live in harmony with all. These things are core to living with joy, as "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord (1 Timothy 1:7-8a)." While many Japanese deem Christianity to be in conflict with their way of life, this thesis is written from the conviction that Christianity and Japanese culture *are* compatible and could have a beautiful symbiotic relationship in the future. Christianity takes the culture of Japan and gives it a distinct *purpose*. Not out of fear of consequence, but from the beauty of the joy that can only be found through the love of Christ being exhibited in one's relationships with others. This is how Christianity could benefit Japan.

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