

# Eclipse of the Son: The Fate of the 1880s Revival in Meiji Japan

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## Abstract

Japanese Christianity in the 1880s was experiencing significant growth, so much so that missionaries were proclaiming that Japan would become the center of East Asian Christianity by the turn of the century. However, this trend reversed itself in the 1890s, when Christianity was no longer looked upon with favor by the Japanese people, and the rapid growth of the previous decade thus reversed itself into decline. After exploring Christianity's rapid growth in the 1880s (which is rarely mentioned in "revival" literature, despite its resemblance to other, more famous revivals of the period), this article will explore several reasons for its reversal.

**Key Words:** Christianity, Japan, reversal, revival

## Introduction

Widespread awareness of Christianity's slow growth in Japan has obscured periods of significant growth that have occurred. The 1880s was one of those stretches when Christianity grew enough to cause missionaries to forecast Japan's Christianization and strategic role for Christian advancement throughout East Asia. During the 1890s, however, Christianity in Japan steeply declined. This article explores both Japan's late-nineteenth-century decade of Christian growth and the ensuing decade of Christian recession.

## *Rebaibaru!*: The Japanese 1880s Revival Period

Although not as widely spoken of today in revival literature circles as other, and more famous, Christian revivals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Japanese church experienced a period of rapid expansion and revival during the 1880s. While the Catholic and Orthodox churches were also rapidly expanding during this period (Cary 1994, 353-355, 414-415), the scope of the present exploration is limited to the Protestant churches of Japan. The growth was substantial enough for at least some missionaries of the time to proclaim that Japan would soon become a center for Christianity in Asia. Some of these missionaries, such as Guido Verbeck, even called for a moratorium on additional missionaries because of his optimistic impression that Japan would embrace Christianity within the next generation. He declared,

Christianity is safe today in Japan, even if we foreigners should all have to leave... I think I am less sanguine than many others, but it is my confident belief that if the missionary societies are faithful to their charge up to the end of this century you need not after 1890 send any more missionaries to Japan. You will need to support the men already there and the institutions for a while, but no new men will need to go. The finishing up of the work can be safely left to the foreign force which will by that time be there, working in conjunction with the ever-increasing number of native pastors and evangelists (Mudge 1889, 411-412).

While we may have the advantage of hindsight in knowing that such an embrace of this foreign religion not only did not happen but would instead reverse itself within a few years, the missionaries of the period had reason for their optimism.

By the 1880s, the earlier social stigma against Christianity seemed to have disappeared, specifically among the middle-class intellectuals, to the degree that several prominent voices began advocating for wholesale adoption of Christianity in Japan. One of these vocal proponents for Christianity was Fukuzawa Yukichi, an influential thought leader, journalist, and editor. Though initially hostile toward Christianity, Fukuzawa became one of its more vocal advocates in 1884, exhorting people to conversion because of the perceived moral and intellectual superiority of Christianity, when compared to the more established Japanese religions. Another proponent was Nakamura Masanao, who declared that nation-wide conversion to Christianity was a necessity for the modernization of Japan, and he even insisted that the emperor should lead the people by example and become baptized. As a final example, Ito Hirobumi, the first Prime Minister of modern Japan, became convinced that Japan would never be perceived as equal to the Western powers unless it became permissive toward Christianity, if not endorse it. Accordingly, the cry of many Japanese Christians became “Christ for Japan and Japan for Christ!” (Drummond 1971, 191-192; Mudge 1889, 411; Ritter 1898, 125-128; Thelle 1987, 48; Yanagita 1957, 39, 45).

The Meiji government had elected to pursue westernization as a policy, so the earlier feelings of suspicion toward foreigners became open curiosity and a desire to embrace the advanced technology and ideas of the Western world. The medical and educational initiatives of the largest Christian denominations thus came into demand, and many of the ruling class of the Meiji period became students of the missionaries. For instance, Iwakura Tomomi, a high-ranking official within the court and student of Guido Verbeck, was the ambassador in the 1871 delegation to renegotiate the diplomatic treaties signed with the Western nations (Drummond 1971, 163; Lee 1966, 90). Thus, during the 1880s, since Christianity was equated in the collective Japanese mind with Western civilization, it also became a subject of open curiosity and its ideas as a philosophical system became fashionable.

Additionally, the growth rate of Protestant Christianity seemed to double every 2-3 years. To illustrate how dramatic the rate of growth was, in 1872, there were only ten Japanese Protestant Christians; yet, by 1891, Protestant church membership had grown to over 31,000, with most of that growth occurring in the decade following 1881 (Drummond 1971, 159; Uchimura 1971, 92; Yamamori 1974, 31-32).

The first stirrings of revival began at a missionary conference in Osaka in April 1883, then rapidly spread to Tokyo, where continual prayer meetings and the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit were reported throughout the region. Then, in 1884, revivals began to be experienced in several mission schools, the first recorded at the Christian-based Doshisha University in Kyoto. Like the more famous revivals that occurred later in other nations (including its close neighbor, Korea), the revival in Japan began with concerted and sustained prayer and a deep conviction of sin in the lives of the students (Ariga 1973, 11; Cary 1996, 171; Lee 1966, 108; Ritter 1898, 107; Thelle 1987, 55; Yamamori 1974, 62-63; Yanagita 1957, 44). This is how Otis Cary records the events:

About the first of March, several of the Christian students began a daily meeting, which was held at half-past nine in the evening at the close of study-hours. The numbers in

attendance and the interest constantly increased until, on Sunday March 16, the whole school showed that it was greatly moved. The different classes held meetings in which for hours they engaged in prayer, confession of sins, and praise. Through the following week the young men could think of hardly anything else than their relations to God. But few in the school remained unmoved. The students were eager to go out and tell others of the blessings they had received (Cary 1996, 171).

After a week-long respite, 200 students were baptized, then life returned to normal at Doshisha (Ariga 1973, 11; Yamamori 1974, 63). Simultaneously, a similar movement was occurring in many churches. Cary reports of church prayer meetings “full of tears, sobbings, and broken confessions of sins,” with theatres and other large buildings hosting gatherings that filled them to beyond normal capacity, where audiences earnestly listened to preaching of the gospel (Ballhatchet 2003, 46; Cary 1996, 172; Germany 1965, 6; Yanagita 1957, 44). Similarly, throughout 1883 and until 1888, localized revivals were reported across the nation. This is how Kanzo Uchimura described his experience:

It was unanimously agreed upon that a veritable Pentecost did set in after it had ceased to be a human experience for over eighteen centuries. And there was every sign that such was truly the case. First, there was much groaning for sins. Everybody wept, and was considered a block-heart who could not weep on such an occasion. Some miraculous conversions were reported... We all felt something miraculous and stupendous coming over us (Uchimura 1971, 92-93).

Likewise, H. Ritter records several pages of missionary testimonies of nationwide revivals. For instance, the *Missionary Record*, a Scottish Presbyterian publication, declared about a meeting in Kyoto (no date is given), “While there the presence of the Holy Ghost did not make itself felt by so many outward manifestations, still there was a deeper sense of His presence and of the need of His continued help than before.” Charles Warren, a missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), likewise declared, “Showers of blessing which God has graciously granted this year in different parts of the country, and revived by which the native brethren have come to be more closely united in affection and in love,” something he had never seen throughout his twenty years of missionary work in Japan. Robert Maclay declared in May of 1883, “A spirit of religious revival, bringing seasons of refreshing through the presence of the Lord, is spreading in Japan, both in the community of foreigners and among Japanese Christians” (Ritter 1898, 108-109).

According to Keiichi Ariga, the revivals (though seemingly isolated) were so widespread that during this period, the term *reibebaru* (“revival”) entered the Japanese Christian vocabulary (Ariga 1973, 11; Cary 1996, 171). Also, Richard Drummond mentions that the emotional intensity was akin to the American tent revivals of the mid 1800s and to the energy surrounding the foundation of the first Japanese Protestant church in Yokohama in 1872, when the local missionaries had gathered for united prayer (Drummond 1971, 160, 192).

Despite the definite growth, Christianity’s growing popularity was enjoyed differently across various denominations. The Presbyterian and Congregational churches expanded rapidly; the Methodists also expanded, but at a much slower rate; and, the Episcopal and Baptist denominations, while gaining numbers later, remained stagnant prior to 1887 (Yamamori 1974, 49).

Yamamori attributes the growth differences to several factors. While the Presbyterians and Congregationalists were keen on self-governance of local personnel, and were quick to baptize prospective new members, the Episcopal and Methodist denominations were much slower in this process, with missionaries holding control of churches more firmly. Likewise, the Presbyterians had the most foreign missionaries available, focussed primarily in Yokohama, followed by the Congregationalists, who were concentrated in several key ports; meanwhile, the Baptist and Episcopal churches had the least resources, and were not geographically concentrated. Finally, the connection between evangelism and education was highly important. The churches that invested heavily in education gained access to potential recruits; meanwhile, those who focused more on direct evangelism or high liturgy, or who lacked sufficient funds to start schools, tended to be much slower in growth (Yamamori 1974, 49-51, 54-55, 63).

### **Fading Light: The Revival's End**

With the end of the 1880s also came the end of the rapid church expansion. There are various reasons that are usually cited for the reversal of fortunes that struck in the 1890s, each of which will be considered here. However, descriptions of “difficulty” often attributed to this period should be understood with greater nuance than is typically assumed. While the larger denominations (which benefited the most from the explosion of growth in the 1880s) did indeed stagnate and decline during the 1890s, the smaller denominations continued growing. Also, the lack of growth was not so much caused by the lack of baptisms (which remained high) but largely consisted of defections caused by membership withdrawals, exacerbated by the increasingly anti-Western climate of the time (Ballhatchet 2003, 48; Yamamori 1974, 72-73). The reasons for the defections are various and worth noting individually.

Regarding the socio-economic realities of the day, job insecurity or corporate transfers sometimes forced church members to relocate to other communities for employment—often to communities that lacked churches or missionary presence. Relatedly, graduates from the missionary schools (especially girls) were often wed to unbelieving spouses by their family. Other students felt that upon receiving baptism that they had “graduated” from Christianity, as if Christianity were merely an academic subject. Additionally, the main constituency of the church were either singles or half-families (where only one spouse believed), as the presentation of Christianity championed by the missionaries assumed an individualistic worldview. The values inherent in missionary Christianity consequently came into conflict with the traditional family values and beliefs of Japan—including arranged marriages, communal rituals, and ancestral veneration, so perseverance of individual Christians and retention within the church became more difficult. These realities were exasperated by the insufficient pastoral care of members because of an emphasis on evangelism (with post-baptismal care often neglected) (Yamamori 1974, 78-81).

However, many of the defections were also because of realities external to the church. Japan’s increasing connection with the outside world caused a counter-reaction of hyper-nationalism. One of the underlying causes commonly cited is the failed treaty re-negotiations with the Western nations. The original treaties allowed for economic exploitation of Japan by foreign powers as well as granted both residential rights and diplomatic immunity to the citizens of these foreign nations, which meant that the Japanese government was powerless to enforce its civil or criminal legal cases. These rights were not reciprocal, and the Japanese resented the unfair treatment inherent in these treaties. Also, those other nations ignored stipulations of mutual religious non-interference when they pressured the Japanese government to rescind legal decisions considering Christians

and other newer religious groups. An earlier attempt to renegotiate these treaties revealed that the Western powers refused to reconsider if Christianity was disallowed. The Japanese government then (to appease their negotiation partners) legalized Christianity in 1873. While this action, and Christianity's subsequent rise in popularity, was assumed by the reform-minded Japanese to be sufficient to convince the world powers to renegotiate the unfair treaties, their hopes were frustrated when re-negotiation again failed in 1889 (Drummond 1971, 198; Kitagawa 1992, 61; Lee 1966, 93; Murayama-Cain 2010, 213-214; Thelle 1987, 151; Yamamori 1974, 65; Yanagita 1957, 37).

Additionally, there were geopolitical events that discredited the "Christian West" in the eyes of the Japanese, including godless attitudes and behaviors of Westerners (who were equated in the Japanese minds with Christianity) throughout Asia and the Pacific. In addition to personal immorality and scandalous behavior by individuals, Indo-China was seized by France, Kiaochow by the Germans, and the Philippines and Hawaii by the USA, all through military coups, political manipulations, and duplicitous dealing with the local populations (Yamamori 1974, 68).

Furthermore, those Japanese who began to travel for study or business purposes also encountered Western antichristian thought (e.g., Mill, Spencer, Darwin, Paine, Gibbon), providing fodder for those seeking to unite the Japanese nationalists against the monsters of globalization and Christian colonialism (Yamamori 1974, 66, 68). These works were first introduced to Japan by Harvard Zoologist Edward Sylvester Morse, who was appointed as the first Zoology professor at Tokyo Imperial University and became an early anthropologist of Japanese culture (Isomae 2014, 43). Japanese Buddhists, who were threatened by Christianity and sought means to defeat it, actively facilitated the importation and translation of these works. They did this because they noticed through their travels to the rest of the world that modern Christianity was weakened by the anti-Christian intellectual trends of modern academia, in addition to theological unrest (Germany 1965, 10-11; Kitagawa 1966, 242; Thelle 1987, 79, 82).

Speaking of theological unrest, liberal theologies were also introduced in the latter half of the 1880s, which negatively affected the strength of Japanese Christianity. German missionaries from the Tübingen School introduced Higher Criticism, which cast explicit doubt on the veracity of the Bible in 1885. Meanwhile, US-American Unitarians arrived in 1887, whose teachings added doubt to the exclusivity of Christianity, the personhood of Jesus, and "supernaturalism" (Germany 1965, 9-10; Jennings 2003, 191; Thelle 1987, 177-178, 181; Yanagita 1957, 51). Although these teachings infiltrated the continued theological development of Japanese Christianity, their effects were felt differently by the various denominations. Many (though not all) of the Congregationalists, centered in Kyoto, embraced the new teachings. Most of the mainline denominations, centered in Yokohama (now Tokyo) rejected these ideas, preferring the orthodox theologies of their founding denominations. The Mukyokai (Nonchurch) Christians, centered in Sapporo, also rejected the liberal theological teachings (as well Western denominational structures (Jennings 2003, 191; Lee 1966, 122-124; Murayama-Cain 2010, 221-223; Yanagita 1957, 53).

Relatedly, while Christian mission historians point to the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century as being a period of global spiritual revivals within the Christian church, this was also a period of general revival in other world religions as well. For their parts, Buddhism and Shintoism were both re-inventing and re-energizing themselves in light of continuing modernization in Asia, particularly in Japan.

Despite its institutional monopoly since the seventeenth century, by the nineteenth century Japanese Buddhism, by many depictions, had become a superstitious and idolatrous folk religion, “a dense mass of unenlightened, besotted heathenism” that was generally distrusted (Isomae 2014, 99; Thelle 1987, 61). Also, because of Buddhism’s favored status under the Tokugawa regime, it became one of the biggest targets for suppression during the Meiji period. Several of the younger Buddhists began to recognize the weakness of their religion, and they sought to both learn from their enemies and to reform Buddhism to become more robust. This attempt included travelling to other lands (Thelle 1987, 79).

Concurrently, there was a movement to revive Buddhism more widely, to regain ground lost to Christianity. Two influential advocates of Buddhism were Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Dharmapala and Olcott visited various locations in the Asian Buddhist world (including Japan in 1889 and 1891) to unite Buddhists under the banner of the historical Buddha, with their goal being the expulsion of Christianity from Buddhist territories (Isomae 2014, 105, 108-109; Thelle 1987, 109-111).

Meanwhile, a group of Japanese Buddhists participated in the 1893 Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago, USA, representing “Northern Buddhism” to the (primarily Christian) US-American audience (Isomae 2014, 112; Kitagawa 1992, 251; Thelle 1987, 108). As Joseph Kitagawa points out, however, the speakers representing the world religions at the Parliament were not championing the classical forms of their respective religions but were “modern religious reformers” who sought to modernize the religions in question (Kitagawa 1992, 252). Those who presented Japanese Buddhism did so by portraying their religion as rational, secular, trans-sectarian, humanitarian, lay-oriented, and compatible with science and philosophy. They then utilized the enthusiastic response to their presentation, coupled with the fact that they were able to establish Zen Buddhism in the USA, as signs that the so-called “Christian West” was losing interest in Christianity and was now turning to Buddhism as a superior option (Isomae 2014, 112; Thelle 1996, 100-101).

Shintoism had been seeking to reinvent itself since the eighteenth century, especially upon hearing of Western expansionism in other parts of Asia. To reinforce the national identity of Japan, Confucian scholars, such as Motoori Norinaga, Aizawa Seishisai, and Hirata Atsune, began differentiating Shintoism as a separate religious identity from Buddhism (Kitagawa 1966, 170; Lee 1966, 25-27). Since the Meiji Restoration (1868), the Japanese government sought to utilize Shinto religion to unify and galvanize the population, as ideological defense against the aggressive imperialism of the European and American powers, especially because of the international pressure placed on Japan for enforcing the anti-Christian edicts. Japan’s political leaders came to realize that the policy of forced prohibition was no longer a viable policy (Murayama-Cain 2010, 213-214). Instead, through a series of national experiments, a new system was developed, where the nationalistic elements of Shintoism—the myth of the eternity of the imperial family, the central importance of the *kami* (“gods,” particularly Amaterasu), and Japan’s superiority—would be declared as being “non-religious patriotic custom” (State Shinto) in order to protect it from accusations of violating religious freedom (Anderson 2016, 7, 46; Isomae 2014, 52-53; Murayama-Cain 2010, 218). Meanwhile, the more “religious” elements of Shintoism—the rituals, the magico-spiritualistic beliefs, and the mythologies connected to specific deities—were categorized into “Sect Shinto,” formed from newer religious movements that had appeared during the nineteenth century.

Although this transformation of Shintoism could be detected earlier, it would become obvious with the introduction of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, then the Imperial Rescript on Education a year later. These documents would exhort all Japanese citizens to absolute loyalty, filial piety, and personal sacrifice for the imperial state. The Imperial Rescript of 1890 became highly problematic for Christians, and there were several incidents where Christians' opposition were widely publicized as assumed proof of treason and disloyalty by the Christians. The most famous and well-known incident connected to the Rescript was a refusal to bow by Uchimura Kanzo, a Christian writer and teacher at one of the more prominent schools at the time. His refusal became fodder for the antichristian nationalists, who insisted on the incompatibility of Christian faith with nationalistic patriotism.

Another, and lesser-known, incident occurred in 1892 at a small Christian school, where one of the teachers, Okumura Tejiro, was quoted by the media as stating, "our school's policy is not based on Japanism, Asia-ism, or Occidentalism, but it is to nurture global human beings through a humanitarian internationalism" (Anderson 2016, 27; Thelle 1987, 125). However, it is possible that these were not actually the words of Mr. Okumura, but rather the impression of the media toward Christianity. Though a minority of voices argued in defense of Uchimura and Okumura, many of those who were attracted to Christianity when it was popular began to abandon this faith that was no longer seen positively (Ballhatchet 2003, 51-52; Drummond 1971, 211; Kitagawa 1992, 56; Yamamori 1974, 76).

"State Shinto" would continue to solidify during the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Not only would this war result in increased taxes and military drafts, but Japan's victory, as well as the subsequent Russo-Japanese War a decade later, would feed the rising tide of Japanese nationalism and Pan-Asian imperialism. The imperialists questioned the primary loyalties of Christians, causing an obsession among the Japanese Christians to prove their loyalty to Japan.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the 1880s Christian revival in Japan, followed by its sudden reversal in the 1890s. The popularity of Christianity and the energy of the Japanese revival was such that the term "revival" entered the Japanese consciousness, and the missionary community was optimistically hoping that Japan would become the center of Christianity in Eastern Asia. Like other historical outpourings of the Holy Spirit, the optimistic spiritual atmosphere was palpable, so it is easy to imagine what could have been, especially when considering the similarities of the Japanese revival to others that began appearing a decade later around the world. And yet, the vibrancy and growth seemed to evaporate within a few years.

The Japanese reversal, and others like it, are a reminder that the future is not always clear, and lofty declarations of triumph when looking ahead are often premature and short-sighted. True, trends could be learned from historical precedent; yet, history, by its nature, is complex, and the contexts in which that history plays itself out are more interconnected than we often give them credit for.

Despite the setbacks of the 1890s, however, Christianity did continue in Japan and would later influence its culture more than its diminutive size might indicate. This reversal was temporary, and the Church would continue to operate in the pattern of gains and losses until the present day, gaining popularity and societal influence during periods of openness to the outside world and

losing them during times of heightened nationalism. Japanese Christianity has never grown beyond 2% of the overall population. That small percentage makes the churches' persistence, hope, and influence all the more remarkable in light of the ever-looming recession and decline characteristic of Japanese Christian history.

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