CHAPTER SIX

SYNCRETISM OF CHRISTIAN SAMURAI AT THE KUMAMOTO BAND IN JAPAN: FULFILLMENT OF CONFUCIANISM IN CHRISTIANITY

Shuma Iwai

Introduction

From the Christian missions’ perspective, the nineteenth century was critical. Not only was there great European colonial and religious expansion, but Japan also faced a dynamic and important time of transition, especially during the Meiji period (1868–1912). The Meiji Restoration demolished the feudal system and restored the Emperor as ruler of the country. After a long-term national isolation lasting over two hundred years, Japan finally reopened its borders to foreign countries in the late 1850s. Japan, with weakened military forces due to this national policy, developed a national slogan: “Enrich the country, Strengthen the military.”

In such a climate of social and political reform, Protestant Christianity arrived in Japan through missionaries, coming mainly from the United States of America. Christianity was viewed as the spiritual foundation of modern civilization for the great powers of the West, so it was considered significant to introduce Christianity in order to build a new nation-state of Japan.¹ Due to the missionaries’ efforts, many Japanese people became Christians. Consequently, three major Protestant Japanese Christian groups were developed: the Kumamoto Band, the Sapporo Band, and the Yokohama Band. It is not too much to say that these three bands represented Japanese Christianity during that time. Each band had key leaders. Ebina Danjō (1856–1937) represented the Kumamoto Band. Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930) represented the Sapporo Band, and Uemura Masa-hisa (1858–1925) represented the Yokohama Band. Each group exhibited distinct characteristics. The Kumamoto Band was known for its strong sense of nationalism. The Sapporo Band characteristically was known for its spiritualism, and the Yokohama Band was considered to be more

church-centered. These characteristics help to understand the *samurai* Christian leaders who contributed to Christianity during the Meiji Period. Moreover, many members of these three bands were the young sons of the *samurai*, who, during the Meiji Restoration, lost their territory masters at the end of the feudal system. When the Protestant missionaries arrived, these young sons of *samurai* were seeking new allegiances they could serve and to which they could offer their lives.

Of the three major Christian bands, this study focuses on the Kumamoto Band. It was formed by Japanese students at a Western school called the Kumamoto Yōgakkō, in the Kumamoto area located in the southern part of Japan. The school was established by the Kumamoto Clan. The students accepted Christ under the guidance of Leroy Lansing Janes, their teacher at the school. Their background in Confucianism, which was developed at the school, created an environment in which they syncretized and combined Confucianism with Christianity. Syncretism is defined as “the attempt to reconcile diverse or conflicting beliefs, or religious practices into a unified system.” Van Rheenen defines syncretism as “the conscious or unconscious reshaping of Christian plausibility structures, beliefs, and practices through cultural accommodation so that they reflect those of the dominant culture.” Syncretism occurs when one combines Christian beliefs with those of other religious cultures. This study examines Kumamoto Band members’ syncretistic Christianity. Particularly, it postulates why the syncretism between Confucianism and Christianity occurred and why they sought to accomplish the Confucianism spirit by integrating Christian elements. This examination is significant for Japanese Christians to re-think syncretism for understanding Japanese Christianity within this context.

---


3 It is noted that the feudal system used in this paper is different from that of Europe. The feudal system used during the Tokugawa period is unique. It is “the system of the governing classes by the hereditary samurai whose status is fixed under authority.” See Rei Matsura, 2000. *Yokoi Shōnan: Fuyakuteki Seigi toha Nanika* (Yokoi Shōnan: What is the justice of Confucianism?). Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2000, 336.
