Although one would expect a wide gap to exist between the emperors of Japan—allegedly the descendants and high priests of the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami—and Christianity, which regards polytheistic religions as pagan creeds, the modern emperors of Japan and their family members have shown an interest in the religion of the west.\(^1\) Christian officials and educators have occupied senior positions in the palace since the Taishō period, despite the nationalistic atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s, and this phenomenon has widened after the Second World War.

From the early seventeenth century until 1873, Christianity was banned in Japan as an ‘evil faith’ (jakyō) and its believers faced the death penalty. However, the Meiji government was aware of the esteem with which the westerners treated their own religion and it often turned a blind eye to the missionaries’ illicit activities. In 1872, when Christianity was still prohibited, the twenty-year-old Meiji Emperor received in audience the American missionary James Hepburn and accepted from him a copy of the King James Bible.\(^2\) Later that year, the emperor, on a tour of Kyushu, visited the Kumamoto domain school for western studies (yōgakkō), where several missionaries, working as English teachers, secretly spread the Christian gospel.\(^3\) Going out of his way, the young emperor paid a visit to the home of the chief missionary, Leroy Lancing Janes. Four years later, when the ban on Christianity was lifted, Janes converted thirty-five of his students to Christianity and they formed one

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\(^1\) This chapter includes some material that has appeared in Ben-Ami Shillony, *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subservience in Japanese History* (Kent: Global Oriental, 2005).


of the first Christian groups in Japan: the Kumamoto Band.4 A decade later, Christian Japanese teachers were invited to tutor the children of the imperial family and the high nobility. In 1883 Tsuda Umeko, a devout Christian female educator, who had studied in the United States for eleven years, was asked to tutor the wife and daughter of the senior statesman Itô Hirobumi. According to Tsuda’s account, Itô asked her to explain to him the tenets of Christianity. After listening to her for two hours, he admitted that ‘for Japan, Christianity would be a good thing.’ In 1886, Tsuda was appointed teacher of English at the Girls’ Peers School (kazoku jogakkō), where the daughters of the imperial family and the nobility studied.5

In September 1885, Emperor Meiji received in audience the Catholic vicar of northern Japan, Pierre Marie Osouf, who later became the archbishop of Tokyo. Osouf handed the emperor a letter from Pope Leo XIII, in which the pope thanked the emperor for the generous treatment accorded to the missionaries. The French ambassador, Joseph-Adam Sienkiewicz, who attended that audience, reported that after it was concluded, Prime Minister Itô Hirobumi and Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru confided to him that after adopting a constitution, Japan would also adopt Christianity.6 The prediction did not materialize, but the fact that leading Japanese statesmen said this to a foreign envoy shows that the Meiji oligarchs, despite their dedication to Shinto, considered the possibility of adopting Christianity as a national religion. From their point of view, there was no contradiction between the two religions. If parochial Shinto went well with cosmopolitan Buddhism in the past, why couldn’t it go well with cosmopolitan Christianity in the present?