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February 6, 2014

Global Studies

### Christianity in Japan and Zen Buddhism in America

Japan closed from the world for 250 years due to governmental power of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the impact of Christianity. When Zen Buddhism came to America, it was recognized, integrated, and grew in the society. The contradicting philosophies of two religions cause unexpected and different reactions when immersed into opposing cultures; Christianity in Japan and Zen Buddhism in America triggered reverse reactions within each society.

Primarily focused on purifying one's own soul, rather than revering a higher power is the practice of Zen. Like the Samurai, living is in the mindset of being the absolute best person possible and to spend more effort concentrating on how you are living than the result of life. Derived from the supporters of Buddha and specifically the teachings of Bodhidharma. This Indian sage taught at the Shaolin Monastery of China and his "teachings tapped into some developments already in progress, such as the confluence of philosophical Taoism and Buddhism." (O'Brien) This concentrated power of two leading eastern philosophies began in 7th century Japan and eventually led to 9.6 million Zen Buddhists living in Japan today, as well as Zen Buddhism becoming the most prominent schools of Buddhism in America. The unique aspect of Zen, comparative to other forms of Buddhism, is its focus "on attaining enlightenment through meditation" (Zen Buddhism). Meditation encourages the philosophy of having an empty mind; however, empty is not synonymous with vacant. A fresh, free, and flexible mind is an

open one when accompanied with a curious and questioning nature. A Zen Monk explained, “Christianity starts with belief, Buddhism starts with suspicion.” Even though there is no overall set of beliefs in Zen Buddhism, there is still the common ground that enlightenment is similar to having one’s eyes open and believing this can be done by focusing more on the way we live than on life in general. With this background information in mind, it is unusual why with this belief system Christianity had such an incredibly difficult, and somewhat disastrous, affect on Japan.

Arriving in the mid 1500s, Francisco Xavier and his fellow missionaries came to spread the word of God across Japan. Little did they know they had just landed in the Tokugawa Shogunate; the first, and possibly most authoritative military-based shogunate Japan had ever embraced. The process Xavier used was a common one of missionaries: teach the ways of religion and allow people to convert to Christianity. Another interesting way as to how Xavier may have approached Japan was not solely from a conversion perspective, but as from a curious perspective. Up until roughly 200 years ago the West was unaware of religion and aspects of Buddhism, so one can only imagine the curiosity and comparisons one may have with this new concept over 500 years ago. The proof behind this suspicion lies in China...

“At the end of the sixteenth century, the Jesuit missionaries approached Buddhism in China, their understanding was already shaped by fifty years of knowledge gained in Japan. Just as in Japan, the China Jesuits were interested in Buddhism because it provided them with an indigenous vocabulary in which to express Christian ideas.” (Meynard)

Therefore, the missionaries who came to Japan used ways of the culture and Buddhism to explain the ideas of Christianity. From an educational perspective, this is the most logical way to approach teaching new ideas: take one renowned thought and manipulate the word choice to illuminate a new approach. It is obvious “to teach people that Christianity was civilization, and vice versa, was to mislead them by seeds of disenchantment” (Sanneh 230). Although, if Xavier was teaching through the predetermined ideas of the people, it would be illogical to assume he came and forced Christianity in attempt to change their mindset. Such an action would be like explaining an English phrase in Spanish and then proceeding to tell someone that English is the only language out there. However, there is still the fact Zen Buddhism decreased in numbers as the power of Christianity grew. According to the History of Japanese Religion, “The apparent decline of religious influence may partly be due to the circumstance that Zen Buddhism was widely diffused and lost its particular religious impact through the permeation of its artistic sense into secular life” (256). The involvement and focus on worldly life would be a liable reason for some to question Zen and instead follow Christianity, a belief-based system. Assuming this is the truth about Xavier’s approach and considering the inquisitive, accepting nature of Zen Buddhism then the only question left to contemplate is why Japan acted so severely to Christianity.

A country of Zen Buddhists under the rule of a powerful tyrant ruler led to the isolation from Christianity and the rest of the world. However, it is debatable whether or not the religious sect had any impact on the closure of Japan. In 1549 Francis Xavier, a Jesuit priest spreading the word of Christianity, came to the island nation, and nearly 80 years later “as many as 280,000 Japanese Christians were persecuted and thousands were

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martyred. In 1626, Christianity was banned in Japan. For the next 250 years, Japan closed its doors to the rest of the world” (OMF-Christianity in Japan). Some baffled historians do not understand this outcome, and some question how an open-minded Buddhist group of people could allow this to happen. The answer may just lie in the details of the Tokugawa Era. The founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate was none other than Tokugawa Ieyasu himself. As an advocate of international trade, he could not deny working with newcomers and “at first promoted foreign trade and tolerated Christianity in order to secure trade.” Ieyasu had a brilliant mind of economics, but he also knew in order to preserve Japanese culture he had to limit the amount of interaction between the people: he “became increasingly uneasy with what it perceived as the dubious behavior of its trading partners and the spread of what Christianity among the peasants” (Osada 29). In order to keep the residents in his iron fist, Ieyasu had to discourage the involvement of Christianity, contradicting the values of Zen Buddhism completely. It can be predicted Ieyasu made this decision in a completely analytical manner, but then again during this time he was “expanding his own influence and wealth” (BBC). Either way, Japan secluded itself from Christian influence, from the entire world. Those who had converted from Buddhism were shamed, yet some years after opening up to the world in the mid one man spoke of his conversion and said it “was seen by my people as an act of betrayal to my country, since Christianity was the religion of Japan’s primary enemy, the United States” (Irvan). Obviously, this man spoke during World War II, 250 years after Japan closing. However, it is fair to conclude this mindset throughout the people was a lesson taught originally by the Tokugawa Ieyasu in order to control the culture of Japanese citizens. Conversely, there is one aspect contributing to and denying this view. One part

of Japanese culture is to follow the status quo out from the crowd: “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down” (Japanese Proverb). With this said, it would be most reasonable to assume Japan may jump on the bandwagon of becoming westernized and would gratefully accept Christianity. Since this is clearly not the approach taken, it only makes sense to conclude the isolation of Japan was not a decision made by the people, but rather a decision made by the state.

When Zen Buddhism made its way to the west many Europeans and Americans were intrigued and curious. The philosophy only made its way to this half of the world roughly 200 years ago, and “not only were there no Buddhists whatsoever in the West, but few even amongst educated or travelled people would recognise the term” (Clear Vision). During this time in the United States, there were a lot of people migrating from their motherlands, and they brought their ideas and traditions with them to The New World. The reading of cultures continued, and ideas were conjoining; the mixing pot effect was taking place. Bits of all people were coming together, and exposure of cultures became the norm. For example, a “Japanese Buddhist immigrant who arrived later, not only built temples but also invited over to America the Japanese monks who belonged to the various Mahayana Buddhist sects” (Buddhism in the West). Temples were built and communities of Buddhism formed throughout America. There is no questioning the event of Zen coming to America; however, it is unusual to how these different cultures, lifestyles, and religions meshed; however, sometimes they were not so compatible. However, considering Zen Buddhism focuses more on the philosophy of how to live rather than worshipping a higher power, the conflict with other religions may have stayed minimal:

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"The findings can be summarized in a polarized, idealized way: traditionalist Buddhism, with its emphasis on devotion, ritual, and specific cosmological concepts, stands in contrast to modernist Buddhism, with its emphasis on meditation, text reading, and rationalist understanding." (Baumann 58).

Adopting the philosophy of Zen while being able to keep their religious beliefs may have made the acceptance and curiosity of Zen stronger amongst Americans. Also, "some of the oldest universities in America had departments of oriental studies where scholars studied Buddhist texts;" an interesting approach when compared to Japan's reaction to Christianity, a "western" religion (Buddhism in the West).

The controversy as to why Japan acted so severely to Christianity, whereas America accepted Zen Buddhism, is not a simple answer; nonetheless, there are theories that may help to explain and question history. During the 1500s, as Christianity came to Japan with Francis Xavier, the first of many feudalistic shoguns, Tokugawa Ieyasu, had marked his name as an analytical military leader. Considering it was Ieyasu's duty to keep the country in line and running smoothly, there should be no controversy over the fact that Christianity had a significant impact on the 250-year isolation of Japan. The society of Japan at this time, and perhaps still today, is strongly based around honor and loyalty. For example, a samurai's duty is to commence seppuku, a ritual suicide, in order to maintain these standards with his master. Therefore, Ieyasu isolated the Japanese from Christianity to keep honor to his country's religion and show his loyalty to the belief system. Seemingly, he also was under the impression the introduction Christianity would taint and disrupt the efficiently running social system in place: "Ieyasu prohibits Christian activity to maintain political stability" (Christianity in Japan). A large aspect of Zen

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Buddhism lies in its strong roots with nature and controversially, “missionaries represent mostly orthodox Christianity which splits man from nature” (Ames and Ames 15). In order to ensure his orders were followed, “Ieyasu issued the Christian Expulsion prohibiting all Christian activity among Japanese,” and, hence, caused thousands of deaths of the Christian Japanese citizens (Christianity in Japan). This method is, if possible, completely different to the reactions of America to Zen Buddhism. Although, this is not unexpected bearing in mind the First Amendment of the Constitution states the right to Freedom of Religion, and due to access and teachings of various religions and belief systems “an atmosphere of religious tolerance and individual choice [developed] in the West” (Clear Vision). However, set religion is declining to a certain extent, which may also be the reason philosophies, like Zen Buddhism, are rising in popularity. Theorized by The Success of Buddhism in Western World, “Few are concerned about abstract philosophy... However, they are very concerned about how to find more happiness amid the common problems of life.” If this approach were correct and then looking at one of the main focuses of Zen Buddhism, to purify one’s own soul, it would make sense for Zen Buddhism to become a prevalent philosophy in the West. The philosophy of Zen is also simple in integrate into a life of a person who is religious as well, since the main emphasis of Zen is not on a higher power and is instead fixated on being the best person possible.

The opposing philosophies of Japan and America cause reverse reactions when exposed to the other’s primary religion. As the new ideas of Christianity were brought to the Feudalistic government of 16th century Japan, all contact with the outside world was avoided in an attempt to maintain the social order of their country. Tokugawa Ieyasu

closed Japan's doors to discourage Western influence and cease the conversion of Japanese Zen Buddhists to Christianity. Conversely, America is composed of these new ideas and worldly influences from all cultures, including Zen Buddhism. Even though idealistically there seems to be trade of power occurring between these two cultures, the reactions to the influences were almost completely opposite, and therefore allow thousands of speculations to exist. Although, based upon facts it is quite realistic to suspect Tokugawa Ieyasu was the leading advocate to the closing of Japan, and the open-minded base of America led to the acceptance of Zen Buddhism.

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