

Japan's 1 percent

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Kenji Goto, a Japanese Christian journalist who was killed in Syria earlier this year. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Debris2008](#).

Earlier this year, the thugs of the Islamic State murdered a Japanese hostage named Kenji Goto, a thoughtful and even saintly Christian journalist. Goto had for years campaigned for humanitarian causes worldwide, and he found himself in Syria in a vain attempt to rescue another Japanese hostage.

Although we rarely think of Japan as a promising land for Christianity, such a case reminds us that believers do exist there. Goto himself was a convert to the United Church of Christ. Between 2008 and 2010, Japan had two Christian prime ministers in close succession, one Catholic and one Baptist, and astonishingly, these were the seventh and eighth Christians to hold that office over the past century.

Nevertheless, the number of Japanese Christians is tiny—barely 1 percent of the population, far fewer than in neighboring Asian lands. That fact teaches some comparative lessons about the religion's appeal outside the West.

Christianity has a deep history in Japan, and that story is essential to understanding present realities. In the century after 1560, a European Catholic mission won stunning successes in the country before being rooted out in a savage persecution. The faith was banned for centuries, although some hidden believers survived in remote regions. Only in the late 19th century was it once more legal to practice Christianity, and believers were long regarded as suspect because of their foreign creed.

We might think that past persecutions explain the extreme weakness of Christianity in modern-day Japan. But the faith also suffered extreme and persistent violence in other countries where it eventually flourished. Korea is a case in point. Japanese Christians have faced no legal disabilities since the collapse of the militarist regime in 1945, and two generations should be ample time to rebuild from persecution. So why has Japan not followed the example of Christian growth in South Korea or China, or several other countries in the region?

In Korea and China, Christians won their greatest successes during eras of dictatorship or military rule, when there was massive disenchantment with mainstream politics and approved social values. Christianity represented an authentic counterculture, a refuge from oppression, and a voice for human rights. That gave the churches a firm foundation on which to build when restraints were lifted and repression eased.

For all the flaws of the Japanese political parties, the country has been faithfully democratic since 1945 and has never generated the same kind of mass disaffection. A thirst for alternative values might draw some intellectuals or elite cultural figures to Christianity, but not in the way it has elsewhere.

In other Pacific Rim nations, moreover, Christianity carries an aura of progress and modernity, which is a major reason why the Chinese communists (for instance) have largely favored its growth since the 1980s. Japan, in contrast, is long past the era when it looked to the West for advice about modernization in any form. Rather, fashionable Westerners look to that country for cultural and technological trends.

That takes us back to the heroic but ultimately doomed saga of the early Catholic missions, a familiar theme in Japanese history and literature. In contrast to all other Asian nations, Japan's Christianity is powerfully associated not with the progressive future but with the sufferings of a tragic past, and even with a romantic idea of noble failure.

The best-known Japanese example of this approach is Shusaku Endo, the Catholic novelist who is commonly ranked among the finest Christian writers of the 20th century. His great work, *Silence*, depicts a tormented priest during the persecutions of the 17th century, who wanders a desolate landscape of martyrdom and massacre, the church visibly perishing before his eyes. The plot turns on whether, or rather when, he will himself betray his faith. It is a magnificent work, an undoubted

Christian classic, but it takes a subtle and educated reader to find in it a ringing advertisement for the faith. Anything less like Prosperity Gospel teachings would be hard to imagine.

Although Endo was perhaps an extreme case, his writing suggests the profound appeal of Christianity in Japan, but also its strictly elitist nature. Elsewhere in Asia, millions flock to charismatic megachurches—which are unknown in Japan, where Catholicism of a distinctly traditional kind still reigns. By far the country's best-known Christian institution is the very prestigious Sophia University, founded by Jesuits in 1913, which has produced many scholars and political leaders. (Endo was an instructor there.)

In the foreseeable future, Japanese Christianity will not achieve the kind of spectacular growth that has occurred in other parts of Asia. But the faith that does exist exercises a cultural and political influence far beyond what the seemingly paltry numbers might suggest.