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Christ in Emptiness and Compassion: Catholic Japanese Christologies of the Twentieth Century

Abstract

The history of Catholic theology in Japan is a history of faith persevering through silence, persecution, and dialogue. From the arrival of St. Francis Xavier in 1549 to the postwar era, Christianity developed in the shadow of Buddhism and Shintō, gradually discovering its own spiritual language. Out of this tradition emerged four currents of twentieth-century Christology: Sophia, Nanzan, spiritual–pastoral, and memory and history. The Sophia school in Tokyo, inspired by Kyoto philosophy, interprets the concept of *mu* (無, “emptiness”) as an expression of kenotic love. Christ here is movement toward the other, a self-emptying presence in which God reveals himself through relationship and compassion. The Nanzan school in Nagoya develops a theology of dialogue and silence (沈黙, *chinmoku*), understanding faith as encounter (対話, *taiwa*) and hospitality toward otherness. In the spiritual–pastoral current, rooted in everyday experience, Christ becomes a companion of compassion (思いやり, *omoiyari*) and sincerity of heart (真心, *magokoro*). The school of memory and history, grounded in the experience of martyrdom and the hidden Church, formulates a theology of witness (証し, *akashi*) and remembrance (記憶, *kioku*). All these currents share a single intuition: Christ is presence in emptiness, compassion in suffering, and remembrance in silence. The truth of Revelation is not manifested in power but in co-suffering – in the God who remains with humanity in its silence.

Keywords: Japanese Christology, kenosis, compassion, dialogue, silence, inculturation.

Chrystus w pustce i współczuciu. Katolickie chrystologie japońskie XX w.

Abstrakt

Historia katolickiej teologii w Japonii to dzieje wiary trwającej w milczeniu, prześladowaniu i dialogu. Od przybycia św. Franciszka Ksawerego w 1549 r. po czasy powojenne chrześcijaństwo rozwijało się w cieniu buddyzmu i *shintō*, odnajdując własny język duchowości. Z tej tradycji wyrastają cztery nurty chrystologii XX w.: Sophia, Nanzan, duchowo-pastoralny oraz pamięci i historii. Szkoła Sophia w Tokio, inspirowana filozofią kyo-tońską, odczytuje pojęcie pustki (無, *mu*) jako wyraz miłości kenotycznej. Chrystus jest tu ruchem ku drugiemu, obecnością ogołoconą, w której Bóg objawia się poprzez relację i współczucie. Szkoła Nanzan w Nagoi rozwija teologię dialogu i milczenia (沈黙, *chinmoku*), pojmując wiarę jako spotkanie (対話, *taiwa*) i gościnność wobec odmienności. W nurcie duchowo-pastoralnym, zakorzenionym w codziennym doświadczeniu, Chrystus staje

się towarzyszem współczucia (思いやり, *omoiyari*) i szczerości serca (真心, *magokoro*). Szkoła pamięci i historii, związana z doświadczeniem męczeństwa i ukrytego Kościoła, tworzy teologię świadectwa (証し, *akashi*) i pamięci (記憶, *kioku*). Wszystkie te nurty łączy jedna intuicja: Chrystus jest obecnością w pustce, współczuciem w cierpieniu i pamięcią w milczeniu. Prawda Objawienia nie objawia się w potęgde, lecz we współodczuwaniu – w Bogu, który pozostaje z człowiekiem w jego milczeniu.

Słowa kluczowe: chrystologia japońska, kenoza, współczucie, dialog, milczenie, inkultuacja.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Catholic Church and Theology in Japan

The history of the Catholic Church in Japan is a story of interrupted, silent, and reborn presence.¹ Its beginnings date back to 1549, when St. Francis Xavier arrived at the port of Kagoshima, opening the first chapter of the Jesuit mission in the Land of the Rising Sun. In a short time, the Gospel reached two hundred thousand believers, among whom were samurai families and local daimyo. This sudden flourishing of Christianity, however, provoked a reaction from the authorities: from the beginning of the seventeenth century, Christianity was banned, and its followers were persecuted and forced either to apostatize or to hide. During this period arose the community of *kakure kirishitan* (隠れキリシタン, “hidden Christians”), who preserved their faith for two and a half centuries without priests, keeping prayers and rituals in forms adapted to the Buddhist–Shintō environment. Their fidelity became the symbol of a “Church of Silence,” which survived in the shadows like a seed hidden in the earth.

After Japan’s opening to the world in the mid-nineteenth century and the Meiji Restoration (1868), Christianity gradually regained legal status. The rebuilding of the Church began with the missions of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) and the work of religious orders – Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Divine Word Missionaries. In 1891, an ecclesiastical hierarchy was established with the first Japanese bishops, and in the twentieth century, the Church began to organize its own educational and cultural institutions. Catholic schools and universities played a special role: Sophia University in Tokyo (上智大学, *Jōchi Daigaku*), founded by the Jesuits in 1913, and Nanzan University in Nagoya (南山大学, *Nanzan Daigaku*), founded by the Divine Word Missionaries in 1949. These became the cradle of Japanese academic theology.

¹ Yasuo Furuya. 1997. *A History of Japanese Theology*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans.

After the Second World War, the Catholic Church in Japan faced new challenges: dialogue with modern culture, with the traditions of Buddhism and Shintō, and with the experience of suffering and destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this context, theology took on a tone of humility and compassion. Instead of focusing on triumph, it emphasized presence and service. The Second Vatican Council opened a space for inculturation² – for the creative encounter between the Gospel and the language of Japanese spirituality. From this synthesis emerged new forms of theological reflection: kenotic, relational, dialogical, and mnemonic. The Church that once had to remain silent learned to speak through silence, and its theology – stripped of power yet full of sensitivity – became one of the most original voices of twentieth-century Catholicism.

1.2. Japanese Theology in the Twentieth Century

In the broader Asian context, twentieth-century Christology developed at the crossroads of Christian tradition and the continent's rich religious and philosophical diversity. In countries such as India, Korea, and the Philippines, theologians explored ways of presenting Christ as present within the spiritual history of their cultures, giving rise to movements such as liberation Christology, dialogical Christology, and dharmic Christology. Across Asia, particular emphasis was placed on suffering, relationality, and communal identity as privileged places of encounter between humanity and God. Against this backdrop, Japanese Christology stands out for its distinctive subtlety: instead of focusing on grand social or political narratives, it turns toward categories of emptiness, silence, and compassion, drawn from Japan's aesthetic and spiritual heritage. In this way, it resonates with broader Asian theological currents while at the same time shaping a uniquely Japanese interpretation of the mystery of Christ.

Catholicism in twentieth-century Japan was a small community in terms of numbers, yet endowed with immense intellectual and spiritual potential. In a country where Christians constitute less than one percent of the population, Catholic theology was born from the experience of smallness, quietness, and dialogue. For this reason, its voice – subtle yet profound – became one of the most intriguing phenomena in Asian religious thought. With the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Church in Japan faced the challenge of *incultur-*

² Piotr Sękowski. 2022. "Louis Massignon jako prekursor dialogu chrześcijańsko-islamskiego [Louis Massignon as a pioneer of Christian-Islamic dialogue]". *Studia Bobolanum* 33 (1): 149–162; Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki 柯達理. 2012. Minjung jako charakterystyczny rys duchowości koreańskiej [Minjung as a characteristic feature of Korean spirituality]. In *Ekumenizm duchowy – duchowość pojednania*. Ed. Rajmund Porada, 255–270. Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

ation (インカルチュレーション, *inkaruchurēshon*): how the Gospel could be “translated” into the language of Japanese culture and spirituality without losing the truth about Christ. In seeking an answer, four centers of theological reflection emerged, which – though differing in temperament, language, and institutional background – together form a panorama of an original incarnational Christology.

The first is the Sophia school, associated with the Jesuit Sophia University in Tokyo (上智大学, *Jōchi Daigaku*), which developed a relational and kenotic theology – a Christology of emptiness (無, *mu*) and self-emptying (自己放棄, *jiko-hōki*), understood not as metaphors of nothingness but as expressions of divine love. The second center is the Nanzan school in Nagoya (南山大学, *Nanzan Daigaku*), led by the Divine Word Missionaries, focused on the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue – it was there that the theology of silence (沈黙, *chinmoku*) and encounter (対話, *taiwa*) took shape. The third line is the spiritual-pastoral school, rooted in the pastoral work of Jesuits and lay theologians, where a Christology of everyday life, compassion (思いやり, *omoiyari*), and sincerity of heart (真心, *magokoro*) found its voice. The final group is the school of memory and history, in which reflection on the Church as a minority (少数教会, *shōsū kyōkai*) evolved into a theology of witness (証し, *akashi*) and fidelity in silence.

These four schools – Sophia, Nanzan, spiritual-pastoral, and memory – not only complement one another but also together articulate a single, deeply Japanese intuition: Christ is presence, compassion, emptiness, and memory. In these four words, the Japanese Christology of the twentieth century finds its essence.

1.3. Methodology of the Article

This article is based on a comparative analysis of four intellectual milieus – Sophia, Nanzan, spiritual-pastoral, and memory – treated as “schools,” that is, identifiable communities of intellectual practices, theological languages, and institutional frameworks. The criteria for assigning individual thinkers to particular schools are threefold: (1) affiliative – their institutional connections with Sophia University, Nanzan University, or corresponding religious orders and centers; (2) thematic – the dominant conceptual vocabulary, such as 無 *mu*, 沈黙 *chinmoku*, 思いやり *omoiyari*, 証し *akashi*; (3) methodological – the research profile: relational-kenotic, theology of religions and encounter, spirituality of practice and accompaniment, theology of memory and witness.

The corpus of sources consists primarily of printed and online publications, including those in Japanese, used solely for the identification of names and ver-

ification of orthography, never as carriers of arguments or theses. In the spirit of a hermeneutics of inculturation, historical description is combined with an analysis of aesthetic (e.g. 物の哀れ *mono no aware*), spiritual (やすらぎ *yasuragi*, 真心 *magokoro*), and Christological (kenosis, compassion, presence) concepts, showing how in each school these categories become vehicles of dogmatic meaning. Endō Shūsaku is included as a witness of narrative theology (a literary Christology), while maintaining a consistent limitation to Catholic authors; Protestant perspectives serve a contextual function and are not subject to analysis.

The transcription principles include the use of *rōmaji* (Hepburn transliteration) with parallel Japanese script at the first occurrence of a name or term. Key theological and cultural concepts are presented in kanji or kana together with transliteration in parentheses. Citations and footnotes follow the Chicago style; online and encyclopedic sources serve an auxiliary purpose (text location, biographical data). The interpretive strategy rests on a strict distinction between description (determining the actual content of the authors' views) and reconstruction (showing how their language is inscribed within the broader idiom of Japanese Christology), thus avoiding overinterpretation and maintaining transparency in the boundaries of inference.

The article does not undertake a detailed analysis of Japanese aesthetic and spiritual categories, which are extensively discussed in the existing scholarship; its aim is solely to indicate how these concepts are creatively appropriated within the Christological reflection of the four schools.

2. Schools of Christological Thought in Japan

Christological reflection within twentieth-century Japanese Catholic theology unfolds along four distinct lines that may be described as schools of thought. Each arose within a specific institutional and spiritual milieu, yet all stem from a single experience – the attempt to translate the mystery of Christ into the language of Japanese religious sensitivity. Their common goal is to seek a mode of speaking about God that, while remaining faithful to the teaching of the Church, also conveys the rhythm and tone of native spirituality. Out of this need emerged four centers of reflection: the Sophia school, emphasizing relationality and kenotic emptiness; the Nanzan school, developing a theology of religions and encounter; the spiritual-pastoral school, focused on compassion and everyday life; and the school of memory and history, uniting theology with the experience of martyrdom and perseverance in silence. Together, they form a comprehensive picture of twentieth-century Jap-

anese Catholic Christology – a theology that is quiet, relational, and deeply rooted in culture.³

2.1. The Sophia School (上智大学の学派) – Relational and Kenotic Theology

The Sophia school took shape within the intellectual milieu of the Jesuits at Sophia University in Tokyo. Its representatives – 光延一郎 (Mitsunobu Ichirō)⁴, 雨宮慧 (Amemiya Satoshi)⁵, and 門脇佳吉 (Kadowaki Kakichi SJ)⁶ – from the outset raised the question of the possibility of an encounter between Christianity and Japanese philosophy. At the center of their reflection stood the category of emptiness (無, *mu*), deeply rooted in the Buddhist tradition and in the philosophy of the Kyoto School (京都学派, *Kyōto-gakuha*). Philosophers such as 西田幾多郎 (Nishida Kitarō), 田辺元 (Tanabe Hajime), and 西谷啓治 (Nishitani Keiji) had developed a language of reflection on the concepts of nothingness (*mu*, 無) and the “place of being” (*basho*, 場所), which profoundly influenced Jesuit theology. In this sense, the Sophia school, though founded in Tokyo, constitutes a theological continuation of the Kyoto school – transferring its philosophical intuitions onto a Christological plane, reinterpreting the notion of emptiness as an expression of God’s kenotic love. For the theologians of Sophia, this was not about nothingness in a negative sense, but about *kenosis* – the voluntary self-emptying of God in Christ, who reveals Himself not through power, but through relationship.

The Christology of this school is essentially relational. Amemiya, a biblical scholar and theologian of the New Testament, interpreted the kenosis of Jesus as “God’s decision for co-presence,” rather than as a loss of divinity. Mitsunobu developed the idea that the relational structure of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit – can be understood in light of Nishida’s notion of *basho* (場所, “place”). In this space of encounter, God is not a substance but a movement toward the other. These theologians sought a language that would allow one to speak about

³ Michel Fédou. 1998. Christologies japonaises. In *Regards asiatiques sur le Christ*. Ed. Michel Fédou, 201–248. Paris: Desclée.

⁴ 光延一郎 [Ichiro Mitsunobu]. 2010. 神学的人間論入門: 神の恵みと人間のまこと [*Introduction to Theological Anthropology: God’s Grace and Human Truth*]. 習志野市 [Narashino]: 教友社.

⁵ 雨宮慧 [Amemiya Satoshi]. 2009. 聖書に聞く [*Ask the Bible*]. (東京 [Tōkyō]: オリエンス宗教研究所).

⁶ Kakichi Kadowaki. 2012. *Zen i Biblia [Zen and the Bible]*. Kielce: Wydawnictwo Charakter; Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki 柯達理. 2005. Wpływ buddyzmu zen na Kakichi Kadowakiego interpretację Eucharystii [Influence of Zen Buddhism on Kakichi Kadowaki’s interpretation of the Eucharist]. In *Wspólna Eucharystia – cel ekumenii*. Ed. Piotr Jaskóła, Rajmund Porada, 123–130. Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

God intelligibly to Japanese minds, emphasizing the dimension of compassionate love (共苦, *kyōku*).

This theology does not argue with Buddhism – it listens to it.⁷ The concept of emptiness (無, *mu*) is transformed here into a symbol of divine love: God becomes “empty of Himself” so that He may be filled with the presence of the other.⁸ In this kenotic reinterpretation of “nothingness” lies the distinctiveness of the Sophia school: it is a Christology that presents God not as a being above the world, but as a space of relationship, compassion, and gift. In Amemiya’s language, Christ is “the One who disappears in order to be present” – a metaphor perfectly aligned with the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), in which beauty arises from transience.⁹

In this way, the Sophia School presents Christology as a space of relationship, in which God reveals Himself not through dominance but through a kenotic openness to the other. Its originality lies in the creative integration of Trinitarian intuitions with the categories developed by the Kyoto School of philosophy, allowing the Incarnation to be understood as an event of unifying presence. The theologians of Sophia show that Christ becomes recognizable wherever love takes the form of an emptiness open to encounter. In this sense, the Sophia School offers one of the most subtle and intellectually coherent Japanese contributions to the development of twentieth-century Christology.

2.2. The Nanzan School (南山大学の学派) – Theology of Religions and Encounter

The Nanzan school, centered around the Divine Word Missionaries and Nanzan University in Nagoya, developed a reflection on the presence of God in non-Christian religions. Its representatives – 百瀬文晃 (Momose Fumiaki)¹⁰,

⁷ Seiichi Yagi. 1993. Christ and Buddha. In *Asian Faces of Jesus*. Ed. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, 25–45. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

⁸ Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki 柯達理. 2011. “Seiichi Yagiego japońska «chrystologia buddyjska»” [Seiichi Yagi’s Japanese “Buddhist Christology”]. *Studia Oecumenica* 11: 383–394.

⁹ *Mono no aware* (物の哀れ) is a fundamental category of Japanese aesthetics and spirituality, signifying a “tender sensitivity to the fragility of things,” that is, the capacity of the heart (*kokoro*, 心) to resonate with the transience of existence. It is not melancholy in the Western sense but a spiritual attunement to impermanence, in which sorrow and beauty form a unity. First articulated by 本居宣長 (Motoori Norinaga, 1730–1801) in his commentary on *Genji monogatari* (源氏物語), this concept became a hallmark of Japanese cultural sensibility – the awareness that everything is beautiful precisely because it passes away. In twentieth-century Japanese theology, *mono no aware* acquired a kenotic meaning: it describes the way in which God in Christ empties Himself (*jiko-hōki*, 自己放棄) to participate in the transience of creation. In this way, the aesthetics of impermanence becomes a form of theology of the Incarnation, in which the compassionate love of God is revealed – gentle, silent, and full of co-presence.

¹⁰ 百瀬文晃 [Momose Fumiaki]. 2004. キリスト教の原点——キリスト教概説 [The Origin of Christianity – An Introduction to Christian Thought]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 教友社 [Kyōyūsha]; 百

宮本久雄 (Miyamoto Hisao)¹¹, and 宮川俊行 (Miyagawa Toshiyuki)¹² – maintained that theology could no longer remain a mere defense of Revelation but must become a dialogue (対話, *taiwa*). In this spirit, they interpreted God's revelation in terms of encounter, silence (沈黙, *chinmoku*), and hospitality.

For the theologians of Nanzan, silence did not signify the absence of speech. On the contrary – it was the silence of God, who “allows the other to speak.” Drawing inspiration from Rahner and Schillebeeckx, they sought mediating categories between grace and the religious experience of non-Christians. In the spirit of Zen, they perceived silence as a space of revelation: God remains silent because His word is too gentle to pierce through the noise of dogmatic disputes.

Within this milieu, a theology of hospitality took shape: the Catholic faith in Japan was called to learn how to be present among other religions. The Christian does not arrive as a teacher but as a guest who listens. Nanzan's hermeneutic of “knowledge through encounter” (出会いによる知, *deai ni yoru chi*) influenced an entire generation of Asian theologians of religions.

From this perspective, Christ appears as a compassionate presence that does not annihilate the other but allows the other to be. This is Nanzan's unique contribution to twentieth-century Japanese theology: a Christology that incorporates into revelation the experience of silence, presence, and otherness. Christ is no longer the opposite of the Buddha but the revelation of a God who dwells in many languages.

Seen in this light, the Nanzan School emerges as a laboratory of the theology of encounter, in which Christianity discovers itself through attentive presence to the religions and spiritual experiences of Japan. Its distinctive contribution lies in showing that dialogue is not a strategy or method but a mode of revelation – a space in which God allows the other to speak, while revealing Himself through hospitality and silence. In this way, the theologians of Nanzan broaden the horizon of Christology: here Christ does not appear as a figure of confrontation but as a presence that makes encounter possible, as a Word born in the silence between different traditions. Through this, the Nanzan School offers to Japanese theology an original hermeneutics of dialogue, in which truth manifests itself through attentiveness, mutual listening, and openness to otherness.

瀬文晃 [Momose Fumiaki]. 1985. „現代カトリック神学の聖霊論 [The Pneumatology of Contemporary Catholic Theology]”. 日本の神学 [Nihon no Shingaku, Theological Studies in Japan] 24: 148–156.

¹¹ 宮本久雄 [Miyamoto Hisao]. 2002. 存在の季節——ハヤトロギア（ヘブライ的存在論）の誕生 [The Season of Being – The Birth of “Hayatorogia” (Hebraic Ontology)]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 知泉書館 [Chisen Shokan].

¹² 宮川俊行 [Miyagawa Toshiyuki]. 1979. 安楽死の論理と倫理 [The Logic and Ethics of Euthanasia]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 東京大学出版会. [Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai; University of Tokyo Press].

2.3. The Spiritual-Pastoral School (霊性と司牧の神学) – Theology of Everyday Life and Compassion

The spiritual-pastoral current is represented by Hermann Heuvers SJ (ヘルマン・ホイヴェルス)¹³, 高木慶子 (Takagi Keiko)¹⁴, and 本田哲郎 (Honda Tetsurō).¹⁵ This line of thought did not arise within the university but within pastoral life – in hospitals, among the poor, and in the ordinariness of daily existence. Its spirituality grows out of the experience of the “Church of the little flock” (少数教会, *shōshū kyōkai*), which endures not through institutional power but through tenderness (思いやり, *omoiyari*).

Hermann Heuvers, a German Jesuit who spent most of his life in Japan, taught the simplicity of faith and the beauty of everyday gestures. His homilies and essays revolve around the image of Christ who does not speak from above but bends down in silence. Takagi Keiko, one of the first female Catholic theologians in Japan, made care for the suffering – *grief care* – and the spirituality of empathy the focus of her reflection. In her language, God is the One who weeps with us, and grace manifests itself in the experience of compassion.

Honda Tetsurō, a Franciscan and pastor of the poor in Osaka, developed a Christology of action in which salvation becomes real through gestures of solidarity. What unites this entire current is the conviction that theology cannot remain at the level of discourse but must take the form of life.

The spiritual-pastoral theology therefore has a tone more poetic than speculative. It employs the language of *yasuragi* (やすらぎ, “peace of heart”) and *ma-gokoro* (真心, “sincerity of heart”) to describe the relationship between human beings and God. It is a gentle spirituality in which revelation occurs through presence and compassion. In this school, Christ is not so much a teacher of truth as a companion on the way – present in the rhythm of daily life, in silence, in relationships, and in pain.

In this perspective, the Spiritual-Pastoral School emerges as a theology of incarnation lived from below – a Christology shaped not in the academy but in the

¹³ Hermann Heuvers [ヘルマン・ホイヴェルス]. 1931. The 26 Martyrs of Japan [日本二十六聖人]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 上智大学 [Sophia University].

¹⁴ 高木慶子 [Takagi Keiko]. 1994. 聖書によるキリスト [Christ According to the Bible]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: サンパウロ [San Paulo]; 高木慶子 [Takagi Keiko]. 1985. はい・ありがとう・ごめんなさい: 家庭における母と子の姿 [Yes, Thank You, Sorry: Mothers and Children in the Home]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 女子パウロ会 [Daughters of St. Paul].

¹⁵ 本田哲郎 [Honda Tetsurō]. 1990. イザヤ書を読む [Reading Isaiah], 東京 [Tōkyō]: 筑摩書房 [Chikuma Shobō]. 本田哲郎 [Honda Tetsurō]. 2006. 釜ヶ崎と福音——神は貧しく小さくされた者と共に [Kamagasaki and the Gospel: God with the Poor and the Small]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 岩波書店 [Iwanami Shoten]; 五木寛之 [Goki Hiroshi], 本田哲郎 [Honda Tetsurō]. 2017. 聖書と歎異抄: これまで語られなかった真実 [The Bible and Tannisho: The Untold Truth]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 東京書籍 [Tōkyō Shoseki].

fragile spaces of care, poverty, and interpersonal accompaniment. Its distinctive contribution lies in showing that the mystery of Christ unfolds not only in doctrine or contemplation but in the texture of everyday compassion, where small gestures become bearers of grace. By grounding theological reflection in the rhythms of ordinary life, this school articulates a form of discipleship in which Christ is encountered in the vulnerable, the suffering, and the overlooked. In doing so, it offers a uniquely Japanese vision of Christian life: a spirituality in which tenderness becomes a mode of truth.

2.4. The School of Memory and History (記憶と歴史の神学) – The Church of the Minority and Witness

The fourth current, the School of Memory and History, grew out of reflection on the fate of Japan's minority Church, marked by persecution and silence. Its representatives – 野村良雄 (Nomura Yoshio)¹⁶, 吉満義彦 (Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko)¹⁷, 和田幹男 (Wada Mikio)¹⁸, and the earlier pioneer 岩下壮一 (Iwashita Sōichi)¹⁹ – built a theology that was at once a spiritual history.

Nomura and Wada developed an ecclesiology of the “little flock” (少数教会, *shōsū kyōkai*): a Church that does not need triumph in order to be faithful. In their view, Japanese Catholicism is a community of memory in which the history of persecution – from the *kakure kirishitan* (隠れキリシタン, “hidden Christians”)²⁰ to contemporary forms of marginalization – becomes a locus of encounter with the suffering Christ.

Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko, a lay philosopher and theologian, introduced kenotic thought into this current. His reflection on *mu* (無) and the *élan vital* of East-

¹⁶ 野村良雄 [Nomura Yoshio]. 1963. 宗教音楽の歩み [*The History of Religious Music*]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 音楽之友社 [Ongaku no Tomo-sha].

¹⁷ 吉満義彦 [Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko]. 2022. 文学者と哲学者と聖者: 吉満義彦コレクション [*Writers, Philosophers and Saints: The Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko Collection*]. Ed. 若松英輔 [Eisuke Wakamatsu]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 文芸春秋 [Bungei Shunjū].

¹⁸ 和田幹男 [Wada Mikio]. 1986. 私たちにとって聖書とは何なのか: 現代カトリック聖書靈感論序説 [*What is the Bible for Us: An Introduction to Contemporary Catholic Biblical Inspiration Theory*]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 女子パウロ会 [Daughters of St. Paul].

¹⁹ 岩下壮一 [Iwashita Sōichi]. 2015. 信仰の遺産 [*Legacy of Faith*]. 東京 [Tōkyō]: 岩波文庫 (岩波書店 [Iwanami Shoten]).

²⁰ *Kakure kirishitan* (隠れキリシタン, “hidden Christians”) were Japanese believers who, after the prohibition of Christianity in the seventeenth century (the edicts of 1612–1614), practiced their faith secretly for more than two and a half centuries, hiding from the persecutions of the Tokugawa shogunate. They preserved in secrecy their prayers, rituals, and oral traditions, often blending Catholic elements with indigenous Shintō and Buddhist beliefs. Their history represents one of the most extraordinary examples of the Church's endurance without sacraments or priests, sustained solely by memory and the testimony of faith. This experience of persecution and silence forms the background of Shūsaku Endō's novel *Silence* (沈黙 [*Chinmoku*] 1966) and its film adaptation directed by Martin Scorsese (2016), which portray the drama of missionaries and believers during the period when Christianity in Japan was forced to survive in hiding.

ern mysticism led him to a vision of God acting in history through self-emptying and patience. Yoshimitsu wrote of Christ as “the Word that endures in the silence of history,” a phrase that can be read as a theological continuation of the experience of the martyrs of Nagasaki.²¹

This school reminds us that the history of the Church in Japan is not the chronicle of an institution but the history of memory (記憶, *kioku*) and witness (証し, *akashi*). Its Christology is paschal: God reveals Himself in the silent perseverance of a community that keeps the faith in hiddenness. It is a theology of humility and remembrance – God does not speak from the pulpit of power but from the history of the persecuted.

Beyond the historical and spiritual continuity with the *kakure kirishitan*, the School of Memory and History developed a distinct theological sensibility in which remembering (記憶, *kioku*) is not an act of nostalgia but a mode of discipleship. Nomura and Wada consistently emphasized that the Church in Japan survives not through institutional strength but through the transmission of lived memory – the fragile chain of testimonies whispered from generation to generation. In their view, memory becomes a sacramental locus of Christ’s presence: to remember the persecuted is to make present the Christ who suffered silently with them.

This school also cultivated a theological reading of Japanese history, in which martyrdom is understood not only as heroic witness but as a lens for interpreting national trauma. The devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the social marginalization of Christians over centuries, became for these theologians moments in which Christ’s kenosis entered the fabric of Japanese collective experience. In this sense, Yoshimitsu’s kenotic metaphysics and Iwashita’s emphasis on the “hidden Church” converge: both interpret Japanese Christianity as a history of quiet endurance, where Christ reveals himself in fidelity rather than triumph.

Thus, the School of Memory and History does not merely recount the past; it constructs a theological hermeneutics of survival, in which the Church – small, wounded, often silent – becomes the icon of the crucified and risen Christ dwelling within the shadows of Japanese history.

²¹ *Kakure kirishitan* (隠れキリシタン, “hidden Christians”) were Japanese believers who, after the prohibition of Christianity in the seventeenth century (the edicts of 1612–1614), practiced their faith secretly for more than two and a half centuries, hiding from the persecutions of the Tokugawa shogunate. They preserved in secrecy their prayers, rituals, and oral traditions, often blending Catholic elements with indigenous Shintō and Buddhist beliefs. Their history represents one of the most extraordinary examples of the Church’s endurance without sacraments or priests, sustained solely by memory and the testimony of faith. This experience of persecution and silence forms the background of Shūsaku Endō’s novel *Silence* (沈黙 [*Chinmoku*] 1966) and its film adaptation directed by Martin Scorsese (2016), which portray the drama of missionaries and believers during the period when Christianity in Japan was forced to survive in hiding.

3. Conclusion

The four currents of twentieth-century Japanese Catholic theology – Sophia, Nanzan, spiritual-pastoral, and memory – together form a spiritual landscape that may be called Japan’s incarnational Christology. Each expresses the same intuition, seen from a different vantage point: Christ is presence in relationship, compassion in suffering, emptiness in love, and memory in history.

Japanese theology is not an attempt to “baptize” culture but a testimony that the Gospel can blossom within it like a cherry flower – quietly, briefly, yet with dazzling intensity. Its vocabulary is not dominated by terms of triumph, but by words such as *omoiyari* (compassion), *mu* (emptiness), *chinmoku* (silence), and *akashi* (witness). Together, they compose a spiritual music in which God speaks not through argument, but through presence.

In this way, Japanese theology of the twentieth century offers to universal theology something often lacking in the West – the awareness that the truth of Revelation does not require power but compassion. God does not so much explain the world as He *co-feels* it. Therefore, in Japan one may still repeat the words that Shūsaku Endō placed on the lips of the silent Christ: “I did not turn away from you. I was with you in your silence.”²²

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²² “The Martyrs of Nagasaki” is a general designation for groups of Christians – both foreigners and Japanese – who suffered death for their faith during the persecutions that took place from the late sixteenth to the nineteenth century in the Nagasaki region, the principal center of Catholicism in Japan. The most renowned among them are the Martyrs of 1597: twenty-six Christians (six foreigners and twenty Japanese) crucified on Nishizaka Hill by order of the shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. They were canonized by Pope Pius IX in 1862 as the “Holy Martyrs of Nagasaki.” Their witness symbolizes the beginning of a long period of persecution that forced Japanese believers underground and gave rise to the *kakure kirishitan* (隠れキリシタン, “hidden Christians”) communities. For twentieth-century Japanese theology, the Martyrs of Nagasaki became a symbol of the silent and faithful Church – the same spiritual lineage that Shūsaku Endō portrayed in his novel *Silence* (*Chinmoku*, 1966).

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