Nagasaki is a city largely overlooked by tourists and academics alike. A mere footnote in Lonely Planet’s infallible Japanese travel guide, it is portrayed as the lesser of Japan’s two bombed cities, unnecessary to see for those already visiting Hiroshima. Hiroshima and Nagasaki may share a similar bomb history, but as the Japanese saying goes, *ikari no Hiroshima, inori no Nagasaki*: while Hiroshima rages, Nagasaki prays. Unbeknownst to many, Nagasaki has one of the most unique historical traditions in Japan; a blend of Japanese culture and international imports, Nagasaki was the only point of entry for foreigners during the Tokugawa isolation. It served as an entrepôt for Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century and remains a center for Christian activity today. It is Nagasaki’s distinctive history of diversity, suffering, and prayer that first piqued my curiosity last year and led me to visit.

Eager to assess the modern influence of Nagasaki’s Christian past, I set out to explore how the Christian legacy of the city manifests itself through public history. By spending a month in Nagasaki visiting museums, churches, and World War II commemorative sites, I hoped to discover whether Japanese people living in Nagasaki identified with this Christian history and cared to preserve or promote it. I began with the 26 Martyrs Museum, where director Fr. Renzo de Luca, S.J. generously offered me access to his museum, library, and staff.

My first week in Nagasaki went according to plan. I visited various museums with exhibits pertaining to Christian history, such as the Nagasaki National Museum and, of course, the 26 Martyrs Museum. To experience active parish life, I attended Mass at Urakami Cathedral and at Nakamachi Church. Additionally, I explored World War II-related sites, such as the Atomic Bomb Museum and its accompanying Peace Park. I visited Nyokodo, the one-room hermitage
of Takashi Nagai, a survivor of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, and heard speeches by bomb survivors at the Nagasaki National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims.

Spending time at these sites provided me with a greater historical background of this city. However, I became most interested in the opinions of those who accompanied me to these places. As I grew increasingly confident in my language skills, I made friends in the city who were happy to show me around. In my conversations with college students and with professors, I gained insight into the general population’s relationship to Nagasaki’s Christian history. With these dialogues as a new source of information, I realized it would have been difficult to gauge people’s attitudes through public history alone.

Although I enjoyed these conversations at first and was grateful for the company, I soon learned I had a different conception of Japanese spirituality than my Japanese companions. Taking into consideration the unfathomable faith of the kakure – or hidden – Christian martyrs and the unquestionable influence of Chinese Buddhism, I believed the Japanese to be reverent, balanced, and in touch with nature. Of the Christians in particular, I expected a small yet thriving community that was determined to preserve Christian traditions, was knowledgeable of theology, and was passionately committed to religious formation.

What I found instead was that the Japanese were fairly apathetic towards, not only Christianity, but organized religion in general. The consensus among my new friends seemed to be that religion was unimportant and that most people living in Nagasaki would not peg themselves as religious or pious. Even the Christians that I encountered took a fairly neutral stance as well. Through the Nagasaki Junshin Catholic University, I met a junior named Izumi Miyazaki. I soon began to spend time with her Catholic family. While the Miyakakis were incredibly welcoming and hospitable, many of their beliefs left me curious. For example, Mrs.
Miyazaki did not rebuke Izumi for skipping Mass, reasoning that Izumi’s school and job commitments should come first. Additionally, Izumi deemed the differences between Catholics and Protestants unimportant, even discounting the contrast in Marian veneration. After I asked what religion meant to her, Izumi replied that she only turned to religion in times of suffering. Having expected a strictly devout Christian community, I wondered at the extent of Japan’s secularization.

Puzzled by my discussions with Nagasaki-dwellers, I often talked with Fr. De Luca about Japanese spirituality. He reminded me that many Japanese have every reason to be suspicious of organized religion. During World War II, the Japanese government used Shinto emperor worship to exploit the people. Fighting in the name of divine emperor Hirohito, millions of Japanese died in battle. Ultimately, religious conviction ended only with the devastation of the atomic bombs and unconditional surrender at the hands of foreign powers.

However, Fr. De Luca also expressed regret over the condition of spiritual education in Japan. Unlike in the United States, Japan has few forums for introducing spirituality or for facilitating religious discussion. The primary education curriculum in Nagasaki teaches little about the 26 Martyrs or Christian persecution. Furthermore, most Japanese universities focus solely on preparation for the work force, leaving no room for religion classes. Because of this absence of spiritual conversation, Fr. De Luca found it difficult to convey the importance of preserving Christian history, especially in his campaign to declare the Nagasaki Church Group a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Searching for answers, I investigated the 26 Martyrs Library, soon exhausting its English volumes. Reading many works, mostly by foreign authors, I learned of Japan’s high suicide rate and the disintegration of family life. I read that Japan’s honorable bushido code had been replaced by materialism and opportunism. Authors argued that, while the Japanese were

Outside the 26 Martyrs Museum, this memorial honors Christians killed during Japan’s period of Christian persecution.
polite, so too were they cold, mechanical, and disdainful of foreigners.

Yearning for a change in scenery, I went to dinner with a professor from the Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. This professor, who soon became a close friend, suggested that I take a few days to visit Goto, an island chain off the coast of Nagasaki. He explained that the islands were home to countless *kakure* (Hidden Christian) churches. In a spontaneous leap of faith, I boarded the ferry to Goto only a few days later.

My experience in Goto was arguably the most formative part of my stay in Nagasaki. I gained insights into *kakure* history that astounded and amazed me. Through a strange twist of fate, I ended up staying in a convent with nine Japanese Catholic nuns. After hearing about my interest in Japanese Christianity, a Sister Tashita graciously offered to give me a tour of the churches of the island; we saw a total of sixteen in the span of two days.

With each church we visited, my appreciation for *kakure* history grew. As an American Christian, I have never felt marginalized or oppressed. Although I had heard of the Hidden Christians, I never grasped the reality of their suffering and devotion. One church had a museum containing *fumie*, or images of Mary or Jesus. During the time of the *kakure*, the government required suspected Christians to trample on a *fumie*, or else be killed. Those who complied lived in great anguish, believing themselves damned without access to priests or the sacraments. Also on display were the pearly *awabi* shells, that represented Mary for *kakure* who had no altars or statues to worship. These Christians had an intense devotion to Mary and picked only the most beautiful shells for her.

"While most Japanese do not belong to a particular faith, they all belong to the religion of 'Japaneseness'"

Since it was dangerous for the *kakure* to keep statues of Mary, they used these *awabi* shells to represent her.

After my time in Goto, I returned to Nagasaki rejuvenated and armed with a new outlook. I realized that my personal experience with the Japanese contrasted many of the things I had previously read. Though a large portion of the people of Nagasaki may not define themselves as spiritual, I have never seen more evidence of God. Having come as an outsider, I was taken in by the Japanese in Nagasaki and cared for by complete strangers. What I found, person to person, was warmth, concern for others, and an individuality that none of my books had touched on. Although most of my Japanese friends were non-Christian, they were certainly men and women for others. One night, my Japanese roommate drove me an hour to visit two natural onsen – hot springs – and proceeded to pay for my ticket, my dinner, and several gifts. In another instance, a woman I met at the Nagasaki Junshin Catholic University worked tirelessly to find an English-speaking doctor when I got sick, emailing me every day to check in and make sure I was getting the care I...
needed. If God is love, then I cannot doubt that I found Him in Nagasaki.

In my last week, I also came to value the Japanese people’s religious tolerance, which I originally mistook for apathy. It is the practical habit of the Japanese to adopt only the pieces of religious traditions that benefit the collective. This results in a wonderful blend of traditions; Catholic families like the Miyazakis welcome Buddhist and Shinto festivals each year. At lunch with Izumi after my return from Goto, I asked what Catholicism meant to her. She replied that she was proud to be Catholic, and that leading a Catholic life made her a better person. At that moment, I realized that I had been asking the wrong questions. Striving to understand the amorphous Japanese psyche, I had disregarded the personal opinions of the individuals I met.

Although they may deny it, I have come to believe that the Japanese do have spirituality, one that is communal and abstract. Japanese author Ama Toshimaro calls it “natural religion.” Unlike institutionalized religions, natural religion is experienced subconsciously through participation in rituals and culture. While most Japanese do not belong to a particular faith, they all belong to the religion of “Japaneseness,” a blend of religious traditions that best serve the needs of the Japanese people. The principles of Japanese religion are not exotic: an understanding of our reliance on others and a willingness to put others above ourselves.

On August 9th, the anniversary of the atomic bombing, I attended several events, including an evening procession with the Catholic community. Torches in hand, we silently walked from the bomb hypocenter to Urakami Cathedral, a place of great importance for the Nagasaki Christians. When the ban on Christianity was finally lifted after centuries of persecution, the Hidden Christians marked their new freedom by building Urakami. At the time, it was the largest Catholic church in East Asia and served as a beacon of hope for the future. Years later, it was completely destroyed by the atomic bomb, which killed two thirds of the Catholics in the area. Sadly, today the *kakure* population is nearly extinct, dwindling each year.

Drawing upon Nagasaki’s rich cultural history, American Christians could learn so much from this vulnerable yet especially legitimate community. Pope John Paul II said of Nagasaki, “In this holy place, people of all walks of life gave proof that love is stronger than death.” Echoes of this proof can be found all throughout Nagasaki’s history, from the *kakure*, to the bomb victims, to those working for peace today. A story of true, tested faith, Nagasaki’s history has the potential to inspire people of all beliefs and creeds.

*Illustrating the devastating blow dealt to Nagasaki’s Christian population, these rosaries were warped by the heat of the atomic bomb.*

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