

## Christian Resistance to Empire in Japan 1931-1945

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The first place I read about the faithful resistance to empire by Japanese Christians during Japan's wars of imperial expansion was in Ienaga Saburo's book *The Pacific War*. I had sought out this book in order to learn more about the second world war in Asia, about which I knew very little. As a white person living in the US, my exposure to the history of World War II had focused almost exclusively on the European theater. During a visit to the Edo Museum in Tokyo I remember meandering through an exhibit on World War II and being unable to match up their account of the events of that war with what I'd been taught. So I made it my goal to read about the war in Japan from a Japanese perspective. I found Ienaga's book as the most widely available account translated into English. But the book was almost not distributed at all.

The seeming absence of a Pacific-focused narrative of the war in Japan, at least in Western minds, did not happen by accident (even if it was not by design). Ienaga published his history of the Pacific War in 1968, before he famously faced three escalating lawsuits heard in Japan's Supreme Court, the latest of which ended in 1997. Ienaga filed these suits to protest the censorship his books had received from the Ministry of Education when he presented the same history as a high school textbook. The Ministry of Education had disapproved of Ienaga's critical examinations of atrocities committed by wartime Japan, including events such as the massacre at Nanjing in 1937 and the research Unit 731. The post-war administration's reluctance to examine these atrocities in public view was reinforced by the Allied Occupation's censorship of any publication they deemed subversive, along with censorship of talking about censorship itself. Ironically, the public battle over how difficult history was to be taught is considered to be the beginning of a nationalist backlash in Japan which continues to grow today.<sup>1</sup>

- The delay in stories emerging from this period in Japanese language would then be followed by further delay in written accounts making their way into the English language and into the consciousness of Christians in the US. Then there is the question of whether these stories would be of interest to white Christians in the US; the US has its own stories about its role in the Pacific War.

As my references will have made painfully clear, this analysis is only possible through a small volume of translated works and secondary sources available in English translation – I cannot read Japanese. My hope is that there exist many more resources in Japanese language; my desire is to see a far greater body of works in English on the faithful witness of the Japanese Christians in a time of darkness.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Nozaki Yoshiko. War Memory, Nationalism and Education in Postwar Japan, 1945-2007: The Japanese History Textbook Controversy and Ienaga Saburo's Court Challenges (Routledge Contemporary Japan, Vol. 20); Leheny, David. "Shinzo Abe's appeal to nostalgia and nationalism." [Los Angeles Times](#), 2 August 2019.

But the fact that Japanese Christians' resistance to the immoral demands of imperial Japan was recognized by secular historians at all is remarkable given that the recorded number of individuals who resisted is very small. However, in light of these Christians' profound commitment to resist evil in their time, it is yet more remarkable how few Christians in the US today are aware of Japanese Christians' historic presence and struggles in a conflict that involved both countries. Instead, Christians in the US favor the examples of Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>2</sup> and Corrie Ten Boom – typically presented as individual instances of bravery against state authority in general – in those seemingly rare occasions where an example of resisting state-orchestrated injustice is required.

Why?

- Because the narrative of white Christianity in the US thinks of itself in terms of Christendom rather than as part of a global body of Christ<sup>3</sup>
- Because historical realities are too complex and too uncomfortable
- Both in what they resisted - imperialist war, fascism, state religion
- And in what they stood for - labor, feminism, agriculture and socialism, pacifism

So there's a hesitancy for white US Christians to talk about it for above reasons

But to understand the reach of this movement, See also: **Gordon Hirabayashi**<sup>4</sup>

- While the history of the internment (incarceration) camps is better known, is there an understanding among white Christians in the US that there were Japanese-Americans in those camps whose families had been following Christ for generations?

There's also a reluctance to examine this history in Japanese society, as noted above. For Japanese Christians in particular there is also the difficulty of Christianity's association with white American culture.<sup>5</sup> During the Meiji Era Christianity was seen as a Western import. Indeed "Japanese Christianity has been utilized by the privilege class of Japan for her gesticulation of Europeanized civilization towards Europe and America, if occasion demands."<sup>6</sup>

The admixture of Christianity and political movements also presented a dilemma. In the unusual case of the Japanese Christian anarchists, both the religion and the political agenda were presented as two "imports" that complemented each other. "Anarchism in Japan is, as you see, an imported one together with sciences, technics and Christianity from Europe and America. It made us recognize that the miserable condition of people under the capitalists and the

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<sup>2</sup> The legacy of Bonhoeffer is debated even today along similar fault lines as are the examples of Japanese Christians: the complexities are too many and too discomfiting. See: Looper, Joel. *Bonhoeffer in America: a Land without Reformation*. Baylor University Press, 2021; Green, C. (2021). Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letter to Mahatma Gandhi. *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 72(1), [113-121](#).

<sup>3</sup> See: Charles, Mark and Soong-Chan Rah. *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*. IVP Books, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>5</sup> See: Hiroshi Suzuki. "Why are Japanese Christians so few?" [Talk](#) presented to the International Friendships Incorporation on 26 June 2002.

<sup>6</sup> *A Short History of the Anarchist Movement in Japan*. Idea Publishing House, Tokyo, [1979](#).

government should be overturned by people themselves, while christianity revealed the sinful condition of the soul.”<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, for any Christian studying the past it is always going to be a happier task to find stories of resistance than to uncover stories of the church’s co-option by the state. That difficulty applies here.

- Many Japanese Christians during this time collaborated with the militarization of society to co-opt the Christian religion to imperialist ends. Christians were expected to adhere to the state-sanctioned Christian church.<sup>8</sup>
- “Nearly all the other Christian groups enlisted in the ‘holy war’.”<sup>9</sup>
- “Religion was also enlisted for the war effort.... Passengers on streetcars were required to stand and bow reverently when passing the Imperial Palace or Yasukuni Shrine. The conductor used to say, ‘We are now passing the Imperial Palace. Please bow.’ To refuse was almost unthinkable.”<sup>10</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the voices protesting militarisation and imperialism in Japanese society were often simultaneously protesting the movement by some religious leaders to support these trends. Given the famously small community of Christians in Japan, these arguments frequently took place between members of the same church - for example, Kashiwagi Gien took issue with his mentor Ebina Danjo, who had baptized him into the Kumiai Kyokai (the unified church). This is not to ignore the significant differences among denominations within Japan, small as their congregations may have been, over practical issues which have always given rise to disputes like church governance.

- “Members of the various denominations were organized into patriotic associations at the prefect and national levels. The Kyodan collected money for construction of warplanes in the churches and organized the Pastors' Labor Patriotic Groups, composed of pastors under the age of forty-five forced to work in ammunition plants as patriotic examples for their fellow Christians. Local churches held meetings to pray for military victory, to celebrate victories as they occurred, to bid farewell to departing soldiers, and to promote other means of raising national morale. Religious leaders were called upon to visit conquered nations in order to establish, under military sponsorship, religious organizations identical with those existing in Japan.”<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the topic is also difficult in general, because there is no triumphant narrative of the resistance changing the tides of imperial war.

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<sup>7</sup> Muira, Seiichi, Introduction to *A Short History of the Anarchist Movement in Japan*. Idea Publishing House, Tokyo, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> *Nippon Kirisuto Kyōdan*. See: Ward, Vanessa. “Lifelong homework”: Chō Takeda Kiyoko’s unofficial diplomacy and postwar Japan-Asia relations,” [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#), July 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

- The acts of resistance were small - eg. for Uchimura it was the difference between a half-bow and the full bow required to a representation of the emperor. These acts were ineffective, inefficient and did not result in any obvious change in the course of the war.
- Some dissidents chose silence, which Ienaga refers to as “perfect silence”. “When what a person said and did had to appear to support the war”<sup>12</sup> then silence could be a radical act. Silence as an act of resistance is not intuitive; it is uncomfortable. “Nonviolence, nonpleasure, and nonaggression are also part of our American shadow. These are the things we avoid.”<sup>13</sup> The comparison to the contemplative tradition and silence as a spiritual discipline also presents itself.
- “Changing jobs to avoid both co-optation and compromise of one’s principles may seem like avoidance of responsibility rather than a form of resistance.”<sup>14</sup> Ienaga describes journalists who – when it became clear they would be required to publish only pro-war propaganda – left their jobs to work on farms or to make soap. (This was significant as one of the few factory jobs that did not directly support the war effort.) It might seem like an inappropriate abdication but the community would have recognized the danger involved in sacrificing one’s career, income and social standing.
- Even something as simple as naming dark times for what they are can be difficult and dangerous in an empire at war. Ienaga includes a moving passage from the letter of a university student drafted into the military: “There will be a time when I can talk to you about this long, long night, this unending starless black void.”<sup>15</sup>

### Profiles in chronological order:

#### Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930)

The founder of the Non-church movement (Mukyokai); a journalist and writer. He is known to have published at least 50 works, some of which were written in English.<sup>16</sup>

- The Non-church movement has no formal religious organization outside of study groups or cells of teachers and their disciples. As a result, it was harder for the state to pin them down as a denomination on any political issue. This allowed the movement to continue to the extent it did: individuals could respond to empire on their own terms in their own way.<sup>17</sup> The movement is known for its focus on issues of social justice and pacifism during the war; “the Mukyokai advocate reestablishing [Japan’s] spiritual integrity by making spiritual and material reparation to the Asian countries wracked by Japanese imperial expansion” particularly in Korea.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Everything belongs: The gift of contemplative prayer*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999 (revised 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Ienaga quotes from the private correspondence of Matsubara Shigenobu, a university student drafted into the military.

<sup>16</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>17</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

<sup>18</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

- After having studied in the US, Uchimura returned to Japan in 1888 and worked as a teacher at a preparatory high school in Tokyo. In this role, Uchimura's convictions would come into conflict with the Meiji Ministry of Education's Imperial Rescript on Education. The Rescript was a policy decision which would have the effect of forcing Christians in education to comply or resist with nationalist curriculum and reverence for the emperor as a deity. In 1891, Uchimura Kanzo failed to make a full bow to a document representing the emperor's signature. This was referred to as the *fukei jiken*, or the disrespect incident.<sup>19</sup> In his official response to this incident, Ministry of Education representative Inoue Tetsujiro enumerated the incompatibilities of the Christian faith with the collective patriotism (*kyodo aikokushugi*) imposed by the Rescript. Among these characteristics of Christianity was that the religion was understood to be "a-national" and even "anti-nationalistic" and thus of no use to state education under the Rescript.<sup>20</sup>
- Although he had written in defense of the Sino-Japanese war in 1894, Uchimura adopted a pacifist stance after the exploitative rule of Japan in Korea became clear nearly a decade later.<sup>21</sup>
- By this point (1903) Christianity and socialism were so connected in the public mind that Uchimura wrote a book ('Christianity and Socialism') to delineate the differences between them.<sup>22</sup>

### **Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933)**

Nitobe was an author, educator, diplomat and politician.<sup>23</sup>

- A classmate of Uchimura Kanzo who converted to Christianity partly due to the legacy of William S. Clark at the Sapporo Agricultural College. He became the principal of the Number One High School (Ichiko) when Yanaihara was studying there in Tokyo.<sup>24</sup>

### **Asami Sensaku (1868-1952)**

Asami was arrested in 1943 for his anti-war preaching.

- The resulting trial became known as the "Mukyokai Trial" and is "recalled with pride by the non-Church Christians as the final victory in their fight against nationalism and the authority of the State over religious beliefs."<sup>25</sup>

### **Kinoshita Naoe (1869-1937)**

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<sup>19</sup> Born, Christopher Andrew, "Native Roots and Foreign Grafts: The Spiritual Quest of Uchimura Kanzō" (2017). Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations. [1247](#).

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, Emily. "Christianity in the Japanese Empire: Nationalism, Conscience, and Faith in Meiji and Taisho Japan," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> See: Lam Yan-wing. Reflections on the Life and Thought of Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961). Thesis at Chinese University of Hong Kong. August 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Lam Yan-wing. Reflections on the Life and Thought of Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961). Thesis at Chinese University of Hong Kong. August 2000.

<sup>23</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>24</sup> See: Lam Yan-wing. Reflections on the Life and Thought of Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961). Thesis at Chinese University of Hong Kong. August 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," Journal of The American Academy of Religion. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

A Christian anarchist.<sup>26</sup>

- “Having discovered a contradiction between heaven and earth, my mind could not be in rest. It was the economy of socialism that enabled to comfort my restlessness. Aftermath whenever I opened the Bible, every question was dissolved in the personality of Christ, and proved with his saying and deed, so I was astonished and satisfied.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Ishikawa Sanshiro (1876-1956)**

A Christian anarchist.

- Referring to the support of Japanese Christians for the Russo-Japanese war: “Thus Japanese Christianity, which was before the war the religion of poor, literally now changed within only two years to a great bourgeois religion and a machine of the State and militarism!”<sup>28</sup>
- “Ishikawa Sanshiro went into farming” to avoid contributing to the national war effort.<sup>29</sup> Ienaga reports that there was a real possibility of death for anything less than full-throated approval of the army and the war.

### **Fujii Takeshi (1882-1930)**

The "Jeremiah of Japan" who published *Seisho yori Mitaru Nihon* (Japan in Biblical Perspective) warning the Japanese people of God's coming judgment.<sup>30</sup>

### **Oga Ichiro (1883-1965)**

Oga was a paleobotanist who reintroduced the ancient lotus plant after a Chinese farmer discovered seeds of an extinct lotus species in 1917.

- At the time, Oga was working as an educator in south Manchuria as part of Japan's occupation of the territory.<sup>31</sup>
- Oga was reportedly a disciple of Uchimura, though I've had a hard time finding good sources around his relationship to the Non-church Movement. Regardless, the story of a botanist devoted to his craft against the backdrop of an imperial occupation, bringing something long-dead back to life, presents a remarkable picture of restoration in the midst of injustice.

### **Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960)**

Princeton Theological Seminary<sup>32</sup>

### **Nanbara Shigeru (1889-1974)**

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<sup>26</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *A Short History of the Anarchist Movement in Japan*. Idea Publishing House, Tokyo, [1979](#).

<sup>28</sup> Letter to Albert Johnson, dated 8 December 1906, quoted in Muira, Seiichi, Introduction to *A Short History of the Anarchist Movement in Japan*. Idea Publishing House, Tokyo, [1979](#).

<sup>29</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

<sup>31</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>32</sup> Morimoto, Anri. "The Forgotten Prophet: Rediscovering Toyohiko Kagawa." *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Vol. 28 No. 3 (2007)

Another disciple of Uchimura who would go on to become a professor at Tokyo University.<sup>33</sup>

- In 1942 Nanbara published his book on “The State and Religion” in which he criticized the “synthesis of German idealism and Oriental pantheism” which had been popularized in the 1930s as a basis for racial imperialism.<sup>34</sup>
- “He served as President of Tokyo University from 1945 to 1951” and was succeeded by Yanaihara.<sup>35</sup>

### **Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961)**

A disciple of Uchimura and president of Tokyo University.

- While a student in junior high school in Kobe, Yanaihara “led the students in punishing” another student whose father was a minister who had given a speech promoting “freedom” on campus in contrast to the traditional age-based hierarchy among students. After speaking out against this student, however, Yanaihara “had second thoughts” and began to have an interest in Christianity. He followed a Christian friend (Kawanishi Jitsuzo) to high school in Tokyo where he heard a lecture by Uchimura Kanzo in Shinjuku. He became a Christian during this time and attended Bible studies led by Uchimura, with a turning point taking place when Yanaihara attended the funeral of Uchimura’s daughter Rutsuko.<sup>36</sup>
- In his writing on colonialism after 1931, Yanaihara criticized empire on the basis of racial equality which he derived from his Christian faith - this was in opposition to the social darwinism and patriarchal systems of domination embraced by his teachers and peers at Tokyo University, including Nitobe Inazo, who was also a Christian. As the Japanese empire expanded throughout the 1930s, Yanaihara “determined to use his writings to repudiate the propaganda of the military” and as a result his works faced severe censorship.<sup>37</sup>
- “Yanaihara had visited Manchuria just prior to the outbreak of hostilities and was convinced that the Japanese had deliberately provoked the Incident, thereby deliberately violating the Washington Treaty of 1932 of nonaggression against China. He saw this violation of international law as a treacherous act destined to call down the punishment of God. His book *Minzoku to Heiwa* (Race and Peace) analyzed the concepts of nationalism and racial consciousness in terms of their harmful implications when applied within a narrow egoistic framework which disregarded the basic principles of justice toward other nations.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

<sup>34</sup> Nanbara, Shigeru (1889-1974). [National Diet Library of Japan](#). See also: Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

<sup>35</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

<sup>36</sup> Lam Yan-wing. *Reflections on the Life and Thought of Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961)*. Thesis at Chinese University of Hong Kong. August 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Lam Yan-wing. *Reflections on the Life and Thought of Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961)*. Thesis at Chinese University of Hong Kong. August 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Cardarola, Carlo. "Pacifism among Japanese Non-church Christians," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. vol. 41 (1973), pp. 506-519.

- In 1937 Yanaihara “was driven from Tokyo Imperial University because he criticized Japan’s aggression in China. Stripped of his teaching position and forbidden to write for the media, Yanaihara continued his personal critique in the pages of *Kashin* magazine...”<sup>39</sup> “Yanaihara and Masaki [Hiroshi] continued publishing their defiant little magazines throughout the war, but these sterling efforts were unable to stem the tide.”<sup>40</sup>
- In June 1938: “My burning passion for heaven rests on a complete faith in Christ’s second coming. I leave retribution to God’s hand.” In August 1941: “God’s judgment will be made and God’s providence will be done. Righteousness always triumphs over injustice, construction always defeats destruction. God’s kingdom always triumphs in this world, the glory of Christ will always be exalted.”<sup>41</sup>
- At a Christian meeting in November 1939, “all stood up to honor ‘a certain army general’ (Matsui Iwane, commander of the offensive against Nanjing and the officer responsible for the Nanjing atrocities). Yanaihara asked, ‘Would it not have been more appropriate for Christians to have demanded an expression of regret for those actions? Could anything have been less appropriate than for them to have stood up and honored him?’”<sup>42</sup>

### **Takeda Kiyoko (1918-2018)**

Scholar and diplomat.<sup>43</sup>

- In 1939, one year after having converted to Christianity at a Christian missionary college in Kobe, Takeda began a course of study at Olivet College in Michigan. She went on to study at Columbia University and at Union Theological Seminary in New York.<sup>44</sup> Takeda died at the age of 100 in 2018.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> Yanaihara’s Christian pacifist magazine was entitled *Minzoku to heiwa*, or the Nation and Peace. Masaki Hiroshi published *Chikaki Yori* (From Nearby) as a critique of fascism. Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>41</sup> Quoting from writings from *Kashin* magazine in the *Works of Yanaihara Tadao*, in Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>42</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *The Pacific War: 1931-1945*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>44</sup> Ward, Vanessa. “[Takeda Kiyoko: A Twentieth-Century Japanese Christian Intellectual](#).” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> “A Tribute to Chō Takeda Kiyoko, former WCC president for the Asia-Pacific,” World Council of Churches [press release](#), 27 April 2018.



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