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a cura di  
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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# Upholding faith in isolation: Christians in the Roman Army – Japan’s “Hidden Christians”

by WINFRIED KUMPITSCH<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The Christian discourse in antiquity about the possibility of being a Christian and conducting sacrifices is unsurprisingly dominated by the theological elite, which took a firm stance against the compatibility thereof. However, this discourse cannot conceal that there were Christians who thought it possible. In the elite’s counterarguments to such opinions, there are seldom remarks in regard to the situation faced by Christian soldiers, but when they do appear, they are focused on the rank and file, not officers, although the later had to actively perform sacrifices. Meanwhile there are martyrdom reports of Christian officers, which implies that these must have, up to a certain point, been at ease with the fulfillment of their duties as cultic functionaries and their Christian belief. Modern scholarship has explained this by the lack of rigor in their faith, but in this paper, it will be argued, that the “hidden Christians” of Japan form an ideal comparative scenario. This comparison makes it all the more plausible that the Christian officers were not only able to understand the theological gravity of their actions, but also to find ways to amend them, therefore upholding their self-perception as Christians.

**KEYWORDS:** ROMAN ARMY RELIGION, IDOLATRY, CHRISTIAN MILITARY SERVICE, CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS, PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS, BAN ON CHRISTIANITY, HIDDEN CHRISTIANS, E-FUMI, APOSTASY, MARTYRDOM, UPHOLDING FAITH, SOCIAL ISOLATION.

## *Introduction*

**T**he title will probably cause astonishment, as more than a thousand years lie between the last persecution of Christians<sup>2</sup> in the Roman Empire and the beginning of their persecution in Japan. And yet there are aspects in

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2 In regard to the first three centuries AD the term “Christians” is used here as an umbrella term for all the different groups. This use is not out of ignorance of the plurality of thought and practice of Christianity during this period, but rather because of the lack of detailed

how the Japanese “hidden Christians” handled the distress of conscience, caused by performing actions imposed by the social environment but contrary to their faith that, on closer examination, seem transferable to antiquity and the situation of Christian soldiers, especially officers. The following discussion is based on a proposition that I put forward in my master’s thesis in response to the question of how Roman soldiers were able to reconcile their cultic obligations and their Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> Therefore this paper attempts to highlight similarities between these two social, geographical and chronological distinct groups, in order to search for lessons on how to deal with the case of Christian Roman soldiers.

### *1. Dealing with Idolatry as a Christian in the Roman army*

The Roman army is known to have been characterised by a close-knit network of cult practices. On important occasions of the official army cult, for example, soldiers had to dress in full parade uniform.<sup>4</sup> The military cult also encompassed a variety of different occasions, including the birthday of the emperor and the divinised emperors;<sup>5</sup> important dates in the life of the ruler or great victories of his predecessors;<sup>6</sup> *sacramentum*, the oath of allegiance taken by the tribune at the muster; *nuncupatio votorum*, the renewal of the oath of allegiance, recorded in the Feriale Duranum for 3 January and the *dies imperii Caesarii*;<sup>7</sup> *rosaliae signorum*, the ritual crowning of the signa, which had developed from an ancient purification rite after victories;<sup>8</sup> as well as festivals for the state gods and Rome.<sup>9</sup>

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information about the stances of the individual groups, especially in regard to the topic of Christian military service. The preserved positions of Church fathers about this topic are to be understood as individual positions, not as uniform doctrine. As such it is often difficult to assess definitely how their sentiments relate to the opinion of the majority in their geographical region, let alone to other Christian groups in the wider empire.

- 3 Winfried KUMPITSCH, *Christen im römischen Heer. Der christliche Kriegsdienst und seine Wahrnehmung vor Konstantin*, Erfurt, Akademikerverlag, 2018, p. 89-91.
- 4 Oliver STOLL, *Zwischen Integration und Abgrenzung: Die Religion des römischen Heeres im Nahen Osten: Studien zum Verhältnis von Armee und Zivilbevölkerung im römischen Syrien und den Nachbargebieten*, Habilitation, St. Katharinen, Scripta Mercaturae, 2001, p. 195-96; 230.
- 5 Manfred CLAUSS, *RAC XIII* (1986), col. 1089 s.v. Heereswesen.
- 6 CLAUSS, 1986, cit. col. 1089.
- 7 STOLL, *Integration*, 2001, cit. p. 216.
- 8 CLAUSS, 1986, cit. col. 1089.
- 9 CLAUSS, 1986, cit. col. 1089.

The officers were obliged to perform the rituals on behalf of their subordinate soldiers, just as a magistrate performed them on behalf of his district<sup>10</sup> – they played a mediating role between the gods, the emperor and the soldiers.<sup>11</sup> However, rituals were not only performed in times of peace, but also at important or critical moments before, during and at the end of a military campaign.<sup>12</sup> A Christian who served as a soldier in the first three centuries was thus inevitably confronted with a variety of polytheistic practices and the danger of being accused of apostasy by his fellow believers.

There has been much discussion in scholarship about the relationship of ancient Christianity to military service, with two aspects emerging as the main focus of ancient Christian criticism. First, the abhorrence of the shedding of human blood, which some scholars have wrongly interpreted as an expression of a pacifist attitude in early Christianity.<sup>13</sup> The second is idolatry, which was omnipresent

10 Oliver STOLL, *Offizier und Gentleman. Der römische Offizier als Kultfunktionär*, in: Oliver STOLL (Hg.), *Römisches Heer und Gesellschaft: Gesammelte Beiträge 1991 – 1999*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2001, p. 94; STOLL, *Integration*, 2001, cit. p. 197; 233; Yann LE BOHEC, *Die römische Armee*, (Translated by Cécile Bertrand-Dagenbach), Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2016, p. 275; for the influences of these cultic duties onto the duties of officers in the post-Constantinian period see Winfried KUMPITSCH, *The late antique Roman officer as a religious functionary in the Christian Roman army*, *Nuova Antologia Militare* 10,3 (2022) p. 449-70.

11 STOLL, *Gentleman* 2001, cit. p. 83-84.

12 LE BOHEC, 2016, cit. p. 278-80; for the process in which the ritual-framework of the Roman army developed into a Christian one see Winfried KUMPITSCH, „*Adiuta! – Deus!*“ *Die Christianisierung des römischen Heereskultes im 4.-6. Jahrhundert*, Diss., Rahden/Westf., Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH, 2024 (= *Pharos – Studien zur griechisch-römischen Antike* 51).

13 e.g. Adolf VON HARNACK, *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963 (=Reprint, Tübingen, Mohr, 1905); Cecil John CADOUX, *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics*, London, Headley, 1919; Cecil John CADOUX, *The Early Church and the World. A History of the Christian Attitude to Pagan Society and the State down to the Time of Constantinus*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1925; Roland Herbert BAINTON, *The Early Church and War*, *Harvard Theol. Rev.* 39,3 (1946), p. 189-212; Hans VON CAMPENHAUSEN, «Der Kriegsdienst der Christen in der Kirche des Altertums», in: Klaus PIPER (Hg.), *Offener Horizont. Festschrift für Karl Jaspers*, München, Piper, 1953, p. 255-64.; Luis J. SWIFT, «War and the Christian Conscience I: The Early Years», *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 23,1 Berlin, De Gruyter, 1979, p. 835-868; Louis J. SWIFT, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service*, Wilmington, M. Glazier, 1983; Frances YOUNG, «The Early Church: Military Service, War and Peace», *Theology* 92 (1989), p. 491-503; John Howard YODER, *Christian Attitude to War*,



in the army.<sup>14</sup> When considering the ancient discourse, however, it is essential to bear in mind that none of the sources dealing with this topic were written by men with a military background, but all of them presented exclusively theologically based arguments or demands coming from the perspective of a civilian life. And while these writings form the basis for our understanding of the organised discourse, they at best offer only glimpses at the opinions and practices of the ordinary Christians.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there was no uniform attitude to military ser-

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*Peace and Revolution*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2009; Ronald James SIDER, *The Early Church on Killing. A comprehensive Sourcebook on war, abortion, and capital punishment*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2012; Richard Alan BAKER, *Christians: War and Military Service: From the New Testament to Emperor Constantine*, 2015, in: <https://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/Christians-War-Military-RABaker.pdf> [last accessed: 29.8.2023].

- 14 e.g. Andreas BIGELMAIR, *Die Beteiligung der Christen am öffentlichen Leben in vor-constantinischer Zeit: Ein Beitrag zur ältesten Kirchengeschichte*, London, Forgotten Books, 2015 (= Reprint, München, Verlag J.J. Lentner, 1902); John HELGELAND, «Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173-337», *Church History* 43,2 (1974), p. 149-63; John HELGELAND, «Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine», *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 32/1, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1979, p. 725-834; John HELGELAND, Robert J. DALY, J. Patout BURNS, *Christians and the Military. The Early Experience*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985; Hanns Christof BRENNECKE, ««An fidelis ad militiam converti possit»? (Tertullian, de idolatria 19,1): Frühchristliches Bekenntnis und Militärdienst im Widerspruch? », in: Dietmar WYRWA (Hg.), *Die Weltlichkeit des Glaubens in der Alten Kirche: Festschrift für Ulrich Wikert zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1997, p. 45-100; Heinz-Lothar BARTH, «Das Verhältnis des frühen Christentums zum Militär», in: Wilhelm BLÜMER, Rainer HENKE, Markus MULKE (Hg.), *Alvarium. Festschrift für Christian Gnülka*, Münster, Aschendorff, 2002, p. 1-25; Hanns Christof BRENNECKE, «Kriegsdienst und Soldatenberuf für Christen und die Rolle des römischen Heeres für die Mission», in: Andreas HOLZEM (Hg.), *Krieg und Christentum. Religiöse Gewalttheorien in der Kriegserfahrung des Westens*, München, Schönigh, 2009 p. 180-201; Heinz-Lothar BARTH, «Die Haltung des Christentums zum Krieg. Antike Stimmen und spätere Entwicklung», *Civitas* 17/18 (2013), p. 1-138; KUMPITSCH, 2018, cit.; Andreas GERSTACKER, *Der Heeresdienst von Christen in der römischen Kaiserzeit: Studien zu Tertullian, Clemens und Origenes*, Diss., Berlin, De Gruyter, 2021 (= Millennium Studies 93).
- 15 For example, the Church Orders, who are of especially prominence in the eastern provinces, all contain the excommunication of Christians becoming soldiers, since they are either translations of, or influenced by the *Traditio Apostolica*. In *Trad. Apost.* 16 the baptism of soldiers not willing to abstain from using their sword, nor from oath-taking is prohibited, whilst a Christian wanting to become a soldier shall be cast out, since he has already denounced God. For the topic of Church Orders see Paul Frederick BRADSHAW, Maxwell E. JOHNSON, L. Edward PHILLIPS, Harold W. ATTRIDGE (Ed.), *The Apostolic Tradition: A commentary*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002; Alan KREIDER, «Military Service in the



vice among the Christian groups in the pre-Constantinian period.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly the few surviving sources, who not only set up rules in regards to Christians and the military service, but also try by argument to explain why Christians are supposed to act this way, most often show that they represent a position which is apparently contrary to the position of the local majority. Interestingly from this majority even fewer writings about this topic are known to us.<sup>17</sup> This dynamic is particularly evident in Tertullian's widely cited text *De Corona Militis*, written around 211. In this work, Tertullian († after 220) takes the martyrdom of an unnamed soldier, who had refused to wear the customary wreath during an official ceremony, as an opportunity to show that military service was inadmissible for Christians simply because of the intrinsic compulsion to idolatry associated with it.<sup>18</sup> Although Tertullian's aim in this writing is to demonstrate the impossibility of Christian military service, he shows that the demands he makes are not shared by the majority of Christians, when he complains that the martyr's Christian comrades look on his behaviour with incomprehension,<sup>19</sup> since for them the limited presence at this ceremony was simply part of their official duties without any deeper religious significance. Tertullian had already voiced his disagreement with the widespread view that mere passive participation or not taking the oath was not to be considered participation in idolatry<sup>20</sup> in *De Idolatria* around 207, when

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Church Orders», *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 31,3 (2003) p. 415-442; Alistair Stewart SYKES, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, Crestwood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001; SIDER, 2012, cit. p. 119-125. On the other hand, testifies archaeological evidence from the eastern provinces the possibility of spatial and individual relations between the Roman army and Christian communities in the third century A.D.: In today's Kefar 'Othnay a room was found inside a building used by the military, which turned out to be the prayer room of a group of local Christians including at least one Centurion. See Yotam TEPPER, Leah DiSEGNI, *A Christian Prayer Hall of the third Century CE at Kefar 'Othnay (Legio). Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005*, Jerusalem, Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006, p. 31-43.

16 KUMPITSCH, 2018, cit. p. 101-102; GERSTACKER, 2021, cit. p. 353-360.

17 From these most notably is Clement of Alexandria, for an overview see SIDER, 2012, cit. p. 32-42; KUMPITSCH, 2018, cit. p. 48-52; GERSTACKER, 2021, cit. p. 207-256.

18 TERT. *coron.* 1, 1-2.

19 TERT. *coron.* 1, 4.

20 «Plerique idololatriam simpliciter existimant his solis modis interpretandam, si quis aut incendat aut immolet aut polluceat aut sacris aliquibus aut sacerdotiis obligetur, quemadmodum si quis existimet adulterium in osculis et in amplexibus et in ipsa carnis congressione censendum aut homicidium in sola sanguinis profusione et in animae ereptione reputandum.»

he proclaimed that even tacit participation in polytheistic ceremonies was to be considered an act of apostasy.<sup>21</sup> Because of this, all service for the state (including administrative civilian service!) was to be associated with idolatry and therefore not appropriate for a Christian.<sup>22</sup> However in the same writing Tertullian had to make the concession that witnessing sacrifices when being a guest at private festivals (such as the white toga, espousals, nuptials and naming ceremonies) was not to be considered apostasy, as long as the invitation received was in regard to the event, not the sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> This not only illustrates, that there was a discourse within Christianity which actions were to be considered apostasy, but it turns Tertullian into a crown witness for the influence of the opinion that mere passive participation as well as not taking the oath were not to be considered participation in idolatry.<sup>24</sup>

And if one or the other had doubts about the salvation of his soul, he may have made the sign of the cross or said a prayer during the ceremony, like the Christian servants did in Lactantius's account about the cause of Diocletian's persecution, a behaviour that Lactantius († c. 325) seems to agree with, since he reports that the haruspicy was unsuccessful because the demons were driven away by these signs of the cross and prayers.<sup>25</sup> If this was the case with a haruspicy, why would

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*«Most men simply regard idolatry as to be interpreted in these senses alone, viz.: if one burn incense, or immolate a victim, or give a sacrificial banquet, or be bound to some sacred functions or priesthoods; just as if one were to regard adultery as to be accounted in kisses, and in embraces, and in actual fleshly contact; or murder as to be reckoned only in the shedding forth of blood, and in the actual taking away of life.»* (TERT. *idol.* 2, 2 trans. THELWALL)

21 *«Nam aequae quiescendo confirmas maiestatem eorum, cuius causa videberis obligatus. Quid refert, deos nationum dicendo deos an audiendo confirmes, iures per idola an ab alio adiuratus adquiescas?»*

*«For you equally, by remaining quiet, affirm their majesty, by reason of which majesty you will seem to be bound. What matters it, whether you affirm the gods of the nations by calling them gods, or by hearing them so called? Whether you swear by idols, or, adjured by another, acquiesce?»* (TERT. *idol.* 21, 1-2 trans. THELWALL).

22 TERT. *idol.* 10; 17.

23 TERT. *idol.* 16.

24 CLAUSS, 1986, col. 1097; BARTH, 2013, p. 23.

25 *«Cum ageret in partibus Orientis, ut erat pro timore scrutator rerum futurarum, immolabat pecudes et in iecoribus earum ventura quaerebat. Tum quidam ministrorum scientes dominum cum adsisterent immolanti, imposuerunt frontibus suis immortale signum; quo facto fugatis daemonibus sacra turbata sunt.»*

*«Diocletian's anxious disposition made him an investigator of future events; and while he*

it not apply to any other cult act? Such a diverse practice of protection could well explain why some of the soldierly martyrs described as devout had such long careers before conflicts arose.

So, while there were individual groups who also regarded passive presence as an act of apostasy, for the majority the mere presence was only morally dubious from the point of view that one could be tempted, but in itself it wasn't an act of turning away from God. For both groups, however, the actively performed act of sacrifice was equally problematic. It is known from the writings of Cyprian of Carthage († 258), but also from various martyr reports, that not only the Roman authorities but also some Christians argued that the sacrifice performed under duress did not cause any harm to the person making the sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> Against this background, the question now arises as to how Christian officers were able to harmonise their faith and their duty of sacrifice. However, there are no direct sources to answer this question, as the reflections of the civilian Christian authors are written from a civilian perspective, and against the background of the demands for sacrifice that was associated with the persecution of Christians. Any active sacrifice was thus regarded as apostasy.

In the first two centuries anti-Christian riots had only occurred locally, but in the third century Christians were for the first time put under pressure throughout the empire. The so-called Decian Edict of Sacrifice in 250 called on the entire population of the empire to sacrifice to the gods before a commission under threat of punishment.<sup>27</sup> The attractiveness of sacrifice for Christians was reinforced by the seemingly liberal attitude of the sacrificial commissions,<sup>28</sup> for at least in the

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*was busy in the regions of the East, he was once sacrificing cattle and looking in their entrails for what was going to happen, when certain of his attendants who knew the Lord and were present at the sacrifice, placed the immortal sign on their foreheads; at this the demons were put to flight and the rites thrown into confusion.» (LACT. *mort. pers.* 10, 1-2 trans. CREED).*

26 CYPR. *laps.* 12-13 testifies to this reasoning of Christians, but fiercely resists its correctness, because unless one has really been tortured, one has no hope of forgiveness; in *PASSIO IULI VETERANI*, in: Herbert A. MUSURILLO (Ed.): *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, 260-65 the *praeses* Maximus tries in *PASS. IUL.* 2, 5 to convince the Martyr Julius that if he would perform the sacrifice, he would be free of any responsibility since the responsibility would lie upon Maximus as the superior ordering this; CLAUSS, 1986, cit. col. 1097.

27 Reinhard SELINGER, *Die Religionspolitik des Kaiser Decius. Anatomie einer Christenverfolgung*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 1994, p. 29.

28 Johannes HOFMANN, *Zentrale Aspekte der alten Kirchengeschichte*, Würzburg, Echter Ver-

Egyptian *libelli* it occurs more than once that «[d]ie Kommissionen [...] nicht nur den beim Opfer persönlich Anwesendem [bestätigten], dem Befehl des Kaisers nachgekommen zu sein. Der Opfervollzug durch ein Familienmitglied genügte, um die Bestätigung der Opferkommission für die ganze Familie und deren Gesinde zu erlangen.»<sup>29</sup> The effectiveness of this liberal approach in signing the *libelli* is exemplified by the complaints of Christian authors of the time about the masses of *lapsi* who preferred to save their worldly lives rather than devote themselves to martyrdom.<sup>30</sup> Despite, or perhaps precisely because of this, those who persevered in faith are always praised in such contexts too.<sup>31</sup> An unforeseen side effect of the Decian edict was the theological division over how to deal with *lapsi* within the church.<sup>32</sup> Six years after the death of Decius, Valerian issued two edicts in 257 and 258, which enabled harsh action to be taken against the Christian clergy and believers. He tightened the old Decian measures by imposing a special sacrificial requirement on Christian priests and a general ban on Christian gatherings.<sup>33</sup> The last empire-wide wave of persecution of Christians by Diocletian began in 303<sup>34</sup>, after he had previously purged the army and court of Christians.<sup>35</sup>

This compulsion to sacrifice, initiated by the emperors throughout the empire, deeply shook the Christian communities. In the numerous texts that were written in response to this, calling on the faithful to steadfastly refuse to sacrifice, only the situation of persecution is ever addressed, but not the constantly repeated practice that was a reality in the Roman army. On the one hand, it is of course understandable why this was the case, because from the point of view of the church leaders, no one could regularly and actively perform acts of pagan worship and be a Christian at the same time. On the other hand, the regular performance of acts of pagan worship was a reality for the officers, which begs the question of how Christians within their ranks saw this topic.

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lag, 2012, p.82-83.

29 SELINGER, 1994, cit. p. 103.

30 CYPR. *laps.* 8-9; 13-14; Werner PORTMANN, «Zu den Motiven der diokletianischen Christenverfolgung», *Historia* 39 (1990), p. 240.

31 CYPR. *laps.* 1-3.

32 PORTMANN, 1990, cit. p. 240.

33 ACTA PROC. CYPR. 1, 1-8; CYPR. *ep.* 76-81; EUS. *hist. eccl.* VII 10- 11, 4.

34 EUS. *hist. eccl.* VIII 2, 4.

35 LACT. *mort. pers.* X; LACT. *div. inst.* IV 27, 4.



Tribunus Julius Terentius Performing a Sacrifice (Dura Europos Fresco).  
Photo credit: Yale University Art Gallery, Public Domain

Among the soldier martyrs of the 3rd century are also people who were in this position. According to Eusebius, in 260 the soldier Marinus was reported to the governor in Caesarea in Palestine as a Christian when he was to be promoted to centurion, because he would not be able to fulfil his cultic military duties since he was a Christian. The governor gave Marinus a few hours to consider apostasising, but Bishop Theoteknos managed to persuade Marinus to choose martyrdom.<sup>36</sup> Apparently Marinus, contrary to the reasoning of the one accusing him, had not seen a problem between his Christian faith and the upcoming cultic duties following his promotion. It was only the intervention of the bishop that

<sup>36</sup> Eus. *hist. eccl.* VII 15.



made him decide against his career.<sup>37</sup> In 298, in a garrison within the Hispanic province of Gallaecia, the centurion Marcellus threw down his *cingulum* and *balteum* and broke his *vitis* in front of the gathered troops during the ceremonies in honor of the emperors Diocletian and Maximian. In the first questioning by the *praeses* and during the following questioning by the *praefectus praetorio* in Tingis, Mauretania, he declared that as a Christian he could not continue to sin and serve in the army.<sup>38</sup> The *actae Marcelli* don't give any information about how long Marinus had been a Christian as well as a centurion. But even if one suggests that the change in mind regarding his service, which had greatly surprised his superiors, was brought about by the zeal of the newly convert, forcing him to break with his past sins most spectacularly, even then he would have had to perform at least some cultic acts (for example participating in the daily so-called "morning reports") without raising suspicion before this event. And if one assumes that he had been Christian and centurion for a longer time, then this implies that he was at ease with his cultic duties in the same way as Marinus seemingly would have been four decades earlier. This interpretation of the literary testimonies is strengthened by the epigraphical evidence found by the excavation of Y. Tepper and L. DiSegni in Kefar 'Othnay. During the 2005's excavation in the Megiddo Prison a Christian prayer room, with four mosaic inscriptions, was found in the Roman *vicus*. One of them reads the following: «Γαϊανὸς ὁ καὶ Πορφύρι(ο)ς (ἑκατιντάρχη) ἀδελφὸς ἡμῶν φιλο/τειμησάμενος ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων ἐψηφολόγησε. Βρουτι(ο)σ ἠργάσατα[ι].»<sup>39</sup> The building was abandoned at the end of the third century A.D., most probably when the Legio VI Ferrata got relocated, and the floor mosaic got apparently carefully covered up to protect it from damage before

37 That said, it is also possible that the whole dynamic of the story is a creation of Eusebius in order to exemplify the importance of the bishop to be ever watchful and ready to intervene like a good shepherd if one of his flock is in danger of going astray. The possible literary design, however, does not rule out that this stance, attributed to Marinus, could have been found being shared by some groups of ordinary Christians, it only is a warning against taking the report at face value.

38 Acta Marcelli. A. Recensio M, in: Herbert MUSURILLO (Ed.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, 250-254; Acta Marcelli. B. Recensio N, in: Herbert MUSURILLO (Ed.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, 254-258.

39 «*Gaianus, also called Porphyrius, centurion, our brother, has made the pavement at his own expense as an act of liberality. Brutius has carried out the work.*» (Translation from TEPPER, DiSEGNI 2006, cit. p. 34)



the building was dismantled.<sup>40</sup> This mosaic thus demonstrates that, despite the resolute position of the Christian elite against the active performance of pagan rites, officers of the Roman army could participate prominently in the life of their local Christian community. Thus, the information provided by these two martyr accounts and the mosaic are indications, that not only Christian officers could see no difficulties in combining their cultic duties and their faith, but that also the same sentiment could be shared by their civilian brethren. However, they provide no reason as to why this could be so.

M. Clauss explains this by suggesting that the Christian soldiers had come to terms with the army cult in general, and the imperial cult in particular.<sup>41</sup> He bases this assumption primarily on two points: Firstly, in his opinion the uneducated Christian soldiers would have understood the invitation of Romans 13 as a permission to practice the imperial cult,<sup>42</sup> secondly, he refers to Origen († 253 or 254), who, in chapter 46 of his *Exhortatio ad martyrium*, speaks out against the pagan view, widespread among some Christians, that the names of the gods are arbitrary and that they conceal a single deity, so that every act of worship is only granted to this one deity.<sup>43</sup> According to Clauss, these two lines of thought, in combination with the polytheistic practices prevalent in the Roman Empire, meant that ordinary Christians in particular did not take monotheism very seriously. «Wenn aber die Überzeugung beim Kaiserkult keine Rolle spielt, weshalb sollte man dann nicht dem Kaiser geben, was des Kaisers ist, einen aus christlicher Sicht formalisierten Kult, und dennoch guten Gewissens der christlichen Gottheit, was einer Gottheit zukam, eine Verehrung aus Überzeugung?»<sup>44</sup> However, Clauss' thesis presupposes only two possible attitudes: the first is that the Christian soldiers were not aware of the problematic nature of their actions, i.e. that they lacked awareness of their new monotheistic confession. The second is that they did not even care and that their career and survival were all that mattered to them. And while the existence of people with these attitudes can be

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40 TEPPER, DiSEGNI 2006, cit. p. 42-44)

41 Manfred CLAUSS, *Ein neuer Gott für die alte Welt. Die Geschichte des frühen Christentums*. Berlin, Rowohlt, 2015, p. 295.

42 Manfred CLAUSS, *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich*, München - Leipzig, K. G. Saur, 2001, p. 446-47.

43 CLAUSS, 1999, cit. p. 445.

44 CLAUSS, 1999, cit. p. 448.

assumed with a clear conscience, the general attribution to all Christian soldiers must be firmly rejected, as it creates a polarity between true Christian faith and corresponding actions or untrue faith. While at the same time this notion ignores the complex psychological background behind human decision-making and pretending that breaking the norms of one's own group would mean disregarding or inadequately understanding the norms in question. Furthermore, this argument perpetuates the ancient theological discourse of the ecclesiastical elite, for whom the only options in this topic are to die in faith or to apostasise. Although knowledge of this discourse is important in order to know and understand the framework in which the ancient Christians operated, it is only of limited value when it comes to discussing the agency of individuals in applying these norms in their everyday lives. However, by adopting this elite discourse in the scholarly view, Christian soldiers are denied the agency to make informed decisions in religious and moral matters.

In order to approach an answer to the question of whether it is possible, despite the regularly repeated idolatrous acts of worship and the knowledge of the problematic nature of these acts, to still see oneself as a Christian, and how one could deal with the distress arising from the knowledge of this wrongness, we must not only change the geographical space but also the time under consideration.

## 2. *"Hidden Christians" in Japan*

The chosen comparison is the fate of Christians in Japan between the late 16<sup>th</sup> and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for this comparison is, that after the initial success in bringing Catholicism to Japan, the hopes of the missionaries were crushed when the newly established Shogunate proclaimed a ban of Christianity. This ushered a period of nearly 300 years in which Japanese Christians could only survive by masking themselves as faithful Shinto and Buddhist practitioners. This creates a parallel, worthy of investigation, between the Roman officers who too had to comply with expectations of cultic conformity.

### 2.1. Historical Overview of Christianity in Japan<sup>45</sup>

When the Portuguese Jesuit Francis Xavier († 1552) landed in Japan in the harbor of Kagoshima on the island of Kyūshū in 1549, he quickly achieved missionary success in this province as well as in the residence city of Kyōto.<sup>46</sup> In the following decades, the number of Christians increased steadily, especially as at the beginning it was mainly local lords and their entire retinue who were baptised, hoping to gain trade advantages with the Portuguese.

The anti-Christian proclamations issued out of the blue in 1587 by the previously Christian-friendly Daimyō Tyotomi Hideyoshi († 1598) were therefore aimed at expelling the Jesuit priests from Japan and exerting pressure on Christian lords.<sup>47</sup> However, as implementation outside the areas controlled by Hideyoshi himself was the responsibility of the lords, persecutions, such as the martyrdom of the "26 Martyrs of Japan" near Nagasaki on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1597, only took place locally.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the number of ordinary believers in the territories of Christian lords increased to such an extent that it is assumed that by 1615 there were around 370,000 Christians in Japan.<sup>49</sup> After Hideyoshi's death in 1598, a five-member committee took over the guardianship of his son Toyotomi Hideyori († 1615), which was headed by Tokugawa Ieyasu.<sup>50</sup> After Ieyasu († 1616) defeat-

45 The changing fate of Christianity in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan was the result of various socio-political, religious, societal and economic developments within Japan and the European states, as well as the interactions between the various religious orders, mercantile organisations and individuals, which can't be addressed to their full extend in the following overview. For further information consult the cited literature.

46 Elisabeth GÖSSMANN, *Religiöse Herkunft, Profane Zukunft? Das Christentum in Japan*, München, Hueber, 1965, p. 58; Andrew OBERG, «The Sacred Disguised: An Instance of the Double Use of Space by Japan's Hidden Christians», *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (2/2021), p. 216.

47 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 119; Otis CARY, *A History of Christianity in Japan: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant Missions*, Two volumes in one, Rutland, Vermont – Tōkyō, Tuttle Company, 1976, p.103; Ikuo HIGASHIBABA, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*, Leiden – Boston – Köln, Brill, 2001, p. 127; Miyazaki KENTARŌ, «Roman Catholic Mission in Pre-Modern Japan», in: Mark R. MULLINS (Ed.), *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2003, p. 10; OBERG, 2021, cit. p. 216.

48 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 121-22; CARY, 1976, cit. p. 128; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 133-34; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 10.

49 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 138.

50 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 135.

ed the lords loyal to Hideyori in the Battle of Sekigahara on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1600, he was proclaimed the new Shōgun and established the *bakufu* in Edo in 1603. Since the arrival of a Dutch ship under the English captain William Adams in 1600, Ieyasu was able to make himself independent of the Portuguese in terms of trade by trading first with the Dutch and then, from 1613 onwards, also with the English.<sup>51</sup> Adams, who rose to become a confidant of Ieyasu, endeavoured to denigrate the Portuguese and Spanish, reinforcing Ieyasu's existing distrust of the ambitions of the Spanish and Portuguese kings in Japan.<sup>52</sup>

On 17<sup>th</sup> March 1612, the announcement of a decree in response to a court intrigue involving two high-ranking Christian confidants of Ieyasu led to a further aggravation of the Christians' situation. Fourteen previously influential Christian lords were sent into exile.<sup>53</sup> This was followed on 21<sup>st</sup> March by a ban on the practice of the Christian religion in the areas controlled by the Shōgun. On 6<sup>th</sup> August of that year, this provision was promulgated throughout Japan, making it the first nationwide law.<sup>54</sup> In 1614, the ban on Christianity was confirmed for a third time: the ban was redefined and the previous decrees were issued in the form of perfectly composed legislation for persecution and punishment, which now for the first time also aimed (primarily) at the common people. The reason for these actions are seen in the Buddhist or rather Neo-Confucian conviction of Ieyasu which led him to reject Christianity as incompatible with Japanese culture, since it could not guarantee the unity of religion and state.<sup>55</sup> By the end of the year, most of the missionaries had been expelled from the country and there were no longer any publicly visible traces of Christianity anywhere in Japan: the period of the "hidden Christians" had begun.<sup>56</sup> Despite the ban on entering the country under threat of the death penalty, numerous missionaries attempted to enter Japan in secret over the following decades, with their attempts ending in apostasy or martyrdom.<sup>57</sup>

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51 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 124-32; CARY, 1976, cit. p. 140; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 136-37; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 12.

52 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 140-154.

53 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 164; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 138.

54 KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 139.

55 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 131; 157; CARY, 1976, cit. p. 176; Stephen TURNBULL, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan: A Study of Their Development, Beliefs and Rituals to the Present Day*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2016 (first published 1998) p. 40; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 139.

56 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 132-33.

57 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 143-44.

After Ieyasu’s death in 1616, his son Tokugawa Hidetada († 1632) not only confirmed the previous anti-Christian legislation, but also stipulated that it was to be regarded as the legal canon of the Tokugawa dynasty, i.e., that its validity did not need to be confirmed in the event of a change of ruler.<sup>58</sup> In 1632, his son Tokugawa Iemitsu († 1651) took over the government and proved to be an extremely determined persecutor of Christians. The first mass execution took place in Edo, and led to the increasing use of torture to raise the number of apostates.<sup>59</sup> In 1637, the peasant uprisings in Amakusa and Shimabara were propagated by Iemitsu as proof of the anti-Japanese intentions of the Japanese converts to Christianity due to the high participation of Christian samurai and peasants, which in turn was used as justification for numerous aggravations.<sup>60</sup> In 1639, all Portuguese ships were banned from landing on Japanese shores on pain of death. In 1641, the Dutch trading base was relocated from Hirado to the artificial island of Deshima near Nagasaki. As non-Catholics they were allowed to trade but were still distrusted as representatives of a foreign power.<sup>61</sup> In 1644, the Jesuit Mantio Konishi, the last remaining missionary in Japan, was martyred.<sup>62</sup> A special ministry, the *Kirishitan Shumon aratame-yaku*, was established in 1640 in Edo for the purpose of investigating Christians. A separate prison, the *Kirishitan Yashiki*, was set up for convicted Christians and offices were created in each region to monitor Christians. Until the final abolition of the ban on Christians in 1873, Japanese Christians not only had to make do without instruction and assistance from clerics, but also had to keep their Christian identity secret. Despite this, there were repeated waves of persecution known as *kuzure* “crumbling”, which led to numerous mass executions.<sup>63</sup>

After 1853 Japan began to open up again. Initially, trade agreements were concluded with the USA and then with various European countries. Priests were again allowed to enter the country, though only to provide pastoral care for the foreigners traveling there and so in 1865 the French were granted permission to construct the Oura cathedral in the foreigner district of Nagasaki. Soon groups of Japanese

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58 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 190; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 140.

59 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.135-36; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 42.

60 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 222-28; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 13; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 43.

61 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 232

62 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.139-40; on p.143 she dates, however, the last martyrdom of an European priest to 1639; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 4 dates it 1644.

63 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.140-45; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 43-49.

also came to this church and revealed themselves as Christians, which caused the missionaries to fulfill their pastoral duties to them too in secrecy.<sup>64</sup> The last persecution occurred in 1867-69, after a group of such “hidden Christians” asked for their declarations of apostasy to be nullified.<sup>65</sup> In 1873, the ban on Christians from 1614 was lifted under international pressure,<sup>66</sup> however it took till 1889 that Christianity became an officially accepted religion with the Meiji Constitution and its 28th article.<sup>67</sup> Based on the surviving documents, it is assumed that until then at least 5,000 had found martyrdom, with many more tortured choosing apostasy.<sup>68</sup> Subsequently, the Japanese Christians split into «revived *Kirishitan*», who integrated themselves again into the Catholic Church, and the «*kakure*, i.e. hidden *Kirishitan*», who wanted to maintain the traditions of their forefathers.<sup>69</sup>

## 2.2. *Survival of Christians in Japan during the Time of Persecution*

Like the Christians in the Roman Empire, Japanese Christians were fundamentally aware that martyrdom was the path to follow in the face of persecution. The few surviving Christian-Japanese writings include the writings «*Recommendation of martyrdom*» (*maruchiriyo no susume*)<sup>70</sup> and «*Instructions on martyrdom*» (*maruchiriyo no shiori*).<sup>71</sup> The original names and dates of these writings are uncertain, but they were probably written before 1600.<sup>72</sup> They describe the short earthly suffering of martyrdom, followed by endless bliss, in contrast with the eternal suffering that follows the sin of apostasy. A distinction is made between permissible (flight or only providing information when asked about one’s faith) and impermissible behaviour (practising Buddhist rites in order to conceal one’s own faith, denial of being a Christian when asked directly, feigned apostasy) in

64 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.148-56.

65 KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 16.

66 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.157-58; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 16.

67 Keiji OGAWA, «Japan», in: Gerhard MÜLLER (Hg.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Band XVI: Idealismus – Jesus Christus IV, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1987 p. 530-31.

68 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 154.

69 KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 5.

70 The original titles are lost, these names were given for their edition by Anesaki MASAHARU, 切支丹宗門の迫害と潜伏/*Kirishitan shūmon no hakugai to senpuku*, Tōkyō, Dōbunkan, 1925, p. 173-228.

71 MASAHARU, 1925, p. 229-239.

72 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 148; OBERG, 2021, cit. p. 219.



situations of persecution.<sup>73</sup> While the *Recommendation* is more concerned with answering the question of why martyrdom occurs, and providing examples of the fates of martyrs and persecutors from the Roman times, the *Instructions* talk about concrete actions to be undertaken if one apostasised. They recommend restoring faith in the case of such sinful behaviour by immediately repenting, asking for forgiveness and resolving not to apostasise in the future, and making confession.

In other words, the hidden Christians in Japan were aware that they were doing something wrong. But since they not only wanted to survive, but also wanted to keep the Christian faith alive in Japan,<sup>74</sup> they had to find a way to reconcile the demands of their faith with their actions forced by social constraints and their guilty conscience arising from this incompatibility. This was necessary, for the system finalised by Iemitsu to suppress hidden Christians was a highly effective mechanism for controlling the people. The administrative system was called *bakuhau* and consisted of the central *bakufu* (Shogunate) and the administrative territories of the local lord's *daimyo* or *han*. In the religious sphere this administration was strengthened by the *danka* system and the mandatory affiliation with a Buddhist temple.<sup>75</sup> The system created the iron grasp onto the "hidden Christians" through the implementation of six strategies:

1. Whistleblowers could expect a monetary reward, the amount of which depended on the status of the accused within the Christian community. Such rewards are first documented for Nagasaki in 1619.<sup>76</sup>
2. The five-family groups *goningumi/gonin-gumi* were a particularly effective element of social control. According to this system, the fate of each individual of the group consisting of five families is closely interlinked. If a member commits an offence and is reported to the authorities from outside the group, all members of the five families are punished.<sup>77</sup>
3. The use of *fumie/fumi-e* or *e-fumi* that is the practice of stepping on images of Mary or Jesus. It was initially only applied in the course of questioning by the inquisitors, later also in Kyōto, Nagasaki and the province of

73 OBERG, 2021, cit. p. 219.

74 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.142-43; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 34-36.

75 TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 40.

76 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.142; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 143; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 14.

77 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.142; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 143; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 14; KENTARŌ, «The Kakure Kirishitan Tradition», in: Mark R. MUL-LINS, *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2003, p. 20; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 44.

Kyūshū as a New Year's ritual. The person in question had to step on a painted image, since 1669 lead tablets were used instead, with Mary or the crucified Jesus. While the New Year's ritual was mostly considered a formal act, the performance in front of the inquisitors was faced with more scrutiny, when the body language and facial expressions of the person acting were observed for telltale signs.<sup>78</sup>

4. Introduced in the Buzen province in 1614, pro-forma declarations of apostasy had to be signed and deposited with the magistrate by all Japanese throughout Japan since 1635.<sup>79</sup> That the hidden Christians took those declarations seriously is shown by the fact that the persecution of 1867 had been triggered by a group of hidden Christians who, after celebrating mass with a Portuguese priest, had gone to the magistrate and asked for the nullification of their declaration of apostasy.
5. One had to possess a *tera-ukejo* "temple guarantee/certificate", a annually renewed confirmation of the good Buddhist way of life, issued by a Buddhist temple. In the course of the anti-Christian measures, a nationwide Buddhist temple network was established (completed in 1635), so that one temple was responsible for several villages. It was now the monks' task to be present at all religiously framed family events and to certify the correct performance of Buddhist rites and regular personal contact.<sup>80</sup>
6. Lists were kept to control apostates. In 1687, this system was introduced by recording up to five generations of descendants of members of the five-family group of apostates as well as those executed for Christianity and documenting them for stricter surveillance.<sup>81</sup>

The reaction of the hidden Christians to this all-encompassing system of surveillance and persecution, which made even Diocletian's persecution pale in comparison, was to remain as invisible as possible, and to do everything that was actually forbidden for Christians: they performed the Buddhist rituals purely outwardly, used Buddhist burial customs, images and prayer chains, stepped on the images of Mary and Jesus, signed the declarations of apostasy and visited the Buddhist temples.<sup>82</sup> In short, they did everything that Tertullian and other church

78 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.142; CARY, 1976, cit. p. 228 gives 1658 as earliest mention of the practise; however HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 144 gives 1631 as earliest mention; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 14; Hubert CIESLIK S. J., in: Margret DIETRICH, Arcadio SCHWADE (Hg.), *Publikationen über das Christentum in Japan. Veröffentlichungen in europäischen Sprachen*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 2004, p 71-73; 352; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p.41.

79 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 145; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 14.

80 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p. 132; HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 147; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 14; 21; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 40-41; 44.

81 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 158; KENTARŌ, Roman Catholic Mission, 2003, cit. p. 14.

82 GÖSSMANN, 1965, cit. p.147; KENTARŌ, Kakure Kirishitan, 2003, cit. p. 22; OBERG, 2021,



Fumi-e to Expose Christians by Tokugawa Shogunate,  
Circa 1870 (Meiji period print) - Unknown Author  
Photo Credit: Camellia Tea Ceremony @camelliakyoto, Public Domain.

fathers would condemn them for and accuse them of not sufficiently understanding the meaning of a monotheistic confession. But they did so neither out of ignorance of the gravity of their actions nor out of contempt for the prohibition. It was only during the centuries of isolation, that their teachings became more syncretistic, but they still saw themselves as Christians.<sup>83</sup>

This is demonstrated by the fact that after more than two centuries of isolation, the first act of that group of hidden Christians was to request the nullification of their declarations of apostasy, as well as that the hidden Christians sought to minimize the severity of their performance of *e-fumi*, from the introduction of the practice till its abolishment.

Some washed their feet particularly thoroughly beforehand, others washed them afterwards or burned their straw sandals, mixed the ash with water and then drank it while giving thanks for the divine grace that they had been allowed to touch the holy images.<sup>84</sup> People tried to perform the act of stepping with as much reverence as possible, which in the New Year ritual could mean only stepping on the edge of the picture,<sup>85</sup> a course of action that was impossible in the inquisitorial procedure.<sup>86</sup> After the act, prayers from the *onchrisan* and *orashio* prayer corpora memorised by each hidden Christian were recited and other acts of penance were performed to express one's remorse.<sup>87</sup> In short, even if the hidden Christians did everything they could to survive, they were fully aware of the moral significance of their actions despite the lack of clerical supervision and endeavoured to atone for their misconduct. They had the agency to deal with external constraints and moral and religious demands themselves. This agency was evident in the fact that during the period of isolation and persecution, a distinction was drawn between formal apostasy and actual renunciation of the faith.<sup>88</sup>

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cit. p. 217-220; for a collection of material Kirishitan objects in the Iyo-region see Yasunori FUKUDA, David R. BOGDAN, *Hidden Christians of Iyo: A Preliminary Report*, in: <https://core.ac.uk/download/230499855.pdf> [last accessed: 29.8.2023] p. 39-55.

83 TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 223-27.

84 CARY, 1976, cit. p. 229; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 41.

85 CIESLIK, 2004, cit. p. 72.

86 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 144.

87 KENTARŌ, *Kakure Kirishitan*, 2003, p. 21; CIESLIK, 2004, cit. p. 72; TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 41.

88 HIGASHIBABA, 2001, cit. p. 155.

### 3. *Parallels between the Hidden Christians in Japan and the Christian Roman Officers*

The question that now arises is to what extent the situation of the hidden Christians can be compared with the situation of Christian Roman soldiers, especially officers. In my opinion, there are some good reasons for taking the hidden Christians as an example of how Christian Roman officers could have reconciled the performance of their duties as cult functionaries with their Christian confession.

First and foremost is the isolation of Christians from the clergy. While in Japan after 1639/1644<sup>89</sup> the "hidden Christians" were absolutely cut off from other Christians, the isolation of the Christian soldiers as a whole must be categorised as relative, as the soldiers stationed in a town with a Christian bishop were certainly able to make contact with the congregation. At the same time, however, the isolation of a Christian soldier stationed in a place without a Christian congregation must be considered almost absolute. While we do know from the correspondence of Theodoret († around 460) that, at least in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, soldiers could correspond privately with bishops,<sup>90</sup> this does not indicate how common such interaction was in general and especially in the first three centuries, when the persecutions took place. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that most Christian soldiers only had close contact with Christian clerics during their preparation for baptism. In other words, they were dependent on their own judgment or the opinion of their comrades when making their decision.

This was somewhat different for the hidden Christians in Japan, who could rely on a fixed secret congregational structure, that had been established by the missionaries. These congregations were led by elders (*chokata*), baptismal catechists (*mizukata*), catechists (*oshiekata*) and preachers (*kikiata*), who baptised in the absence of the clergy, administered the calendar and announced the Christian dates, as well as presided over the communal rituals.<sup>91</sup> In other words, the individual could still turn to an authority figure with their questions and needs. The commonality is therefore the interrupted or limited contact with theologically educated clergy, not the potential social isolation.

Then there is the control exercised by the social environment. The soldiers

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89 see footnote 62.

90 THEOD. *ep.* CXLIV.

91 KENTARŌ, *Kakure Kirishitan*, 2003, cit. p. 20; 23.



of the Roman army formed a tight-knit community. They slept, ate, exercised, marched and fought together, which inevitably meant that they knew a lot about their comrades. On the one hand, this meant that the comrades were possibly prepared to turn a blind eye in times of persecution and overlook the Christian confession; on the other hand, knowledge of a comrade's faith could also be used as a weapon against him in the event of disagreements.<sup>92</sup> Such control of behaviour, as represented by the five-family group system in Japan, was unknown in Roman civil society and, with its legal consequences, also exceeded the internal mechanisms of control enacted by the Roman army. In both cases, however, obvious deviation from the behavioral guidelines could not be tolerated by comrades/family members. However, it has to be noted, that the five-family group system was actually supporting the survival of the "hidden Christians" in the more isolated rural areas, if the majority of a group or village was Christian.<sup>93</sup>

It therefore seems permissible to conclude that there were similar intentions guiding their actions, when the Roman Christians sought to protect themselves against potential dangers by making the sign of the cross when passively participating in ritual acts, when the hidden Christians performed acts of atonement after the performance of the *e-fumi* in order to do penance, as well as when the Christian officers, aware of the problem, performed their ritual duties but employed practices for penitential purposes during or after them.

At the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century, Ambrose of Milan († 397) and Augustine of Hippo († 430) discussed the problem of self-imposed acts of penance. While Ambrose argues that it is the sole responsibility of the bishop to impose acts of penance and to decide on the end of penance,<sup>94</sup> Augustine is in favor of the faithful being able to impose acts of penance on themselves for minor offences, but insists on episcopal primacy for serious sins.<sup>95</sup> Even if concrete forms of the penitential acts addressed only took shape in the context of the

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92 Marinus suffers martyrdom because a competitor for the promotion to the centurionate denounces him as a Christian: *EUS. hist. eccl.* VII 15; and envious comrades inform the emperor about the Christian believe of Sergios and Bakchos: *BHG* 1624; *BHL* 7599.

93 TURNBULL, 2016, cit. p. 44; Jan Levin PROPACH, «Japans verborgene Christen», *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 72 (2021) p. 27.

94 Philipp Gerald WYNN, *War and Military Service in Early Western Christian Thought, 200-850*, PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2011, p. 203-09.

95 WYNN, 2011, cit. p. 258-59.



4th century, it can certainly be assumed that the basic idea of this self-imposed penance, namely the new reconciliation with God, dates back longer, because the demand for moral reflection on the conduct of life was always part of Christian teaching. If one therefore assumes that, regardless of the official stance of the clergy, some Christians in the civilian environment took reconciliation with God into their own hands, one can also assume that Christian soldiers who were partially cut off from civilian society, also developed similar practices. This assumption that it was perfectly possible for Christian soldiers to fulfill their cultic obligations in the knowledge of the theological problems of doing so, but to repent on a personal level, means to acknowledge that Christian soldiers also possessed agency in regard to the organisation of their religious lives. However, this agency had been denied to them by the polarised interpretation of the ancient ecclesiastic elite discourse in previous research.

### *Conclusion*

Looking at the situation of Japan’s hidden Christians and how they dealt with the states demands for apostasy, their Christian confession and the resulting sense of guilt opens up the possibility of reconstructing the behaviour of Christian Roman soldiers and officers beyond the information provided by ancient sources. For, as has been shown, while there is evidence for the neutralisation strategies of Christian soldiers when they passively participated in acts of worship for the roman period, the active performance of such acts was always regarded as apostasy, regardless of the circumstances. And if the army is mentioned in the idolatry discourse, it is only with regard to soldiers in general, but not to officers in particular. Following the argument of the ancient church fathers that one was either a Christian and a martyr or an apostate, Christian soldiers before Constantine were considered by scholars to have a low level of Christian moral awareness. The comparison with the hidden Christians shows, however, that it could have been possible for a Christian officer who understood the problems of sacrifice and Christian monotheism to develop behavioral patterns in order to remove the stigma that had arisen through the performance of their cultic duties, regardless of whether this approach was accepted by church doctrine or not. However, since this behaviour, if it existed, was anchored in the individual practices of the respective officer, it was not noticed or commented on by the Church Fathers. The

fact that Ambrose and Augustine dealt with private penitential practices at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century, which were in rivalry with episcopal hegemony, shows the relevance of this theoretical reconstruction. The reality of life allows the individual Christian to realise his agency to a certain extent by being able to evaluate his own faith and actions and take corrective measures, influenced but not predestined by dogmatic decrees. This will have been even more the case for those Christians who, like the hidden Christians, found themselves in a life situation separated from the clergy and their teachings.

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So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosporan Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosporan government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

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