

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

# THE WILSON FAMILY



January/一月 2020

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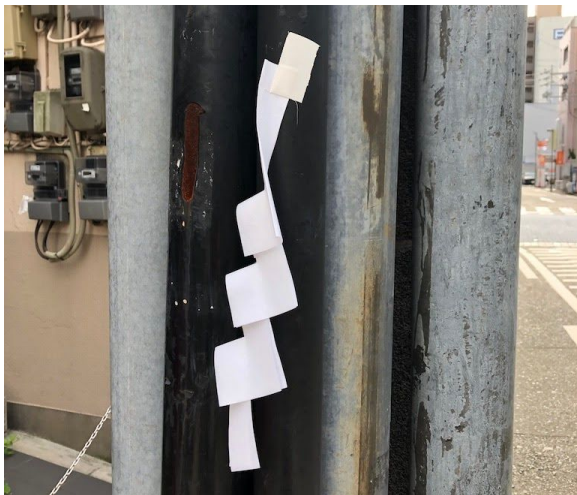
## What is Japan?

The place of Christianity in Japan is a curious one. As we've noted since our arrival, Christians are held in high regard — high enough that many feel unworthy of actually being baptized. Just as we associate Buddhism with the East, for Japanese people Christianity is intimately linked to West, and that includes the

entire rich, complex, stimulating, and troubled inheritance. Missionaries are usually American or European (though that's changing, with Korea sending lots of their own). Converts often don't just love Christ; they love (or at least respect) Plato, the Renaissance, and French cuisine.

Missionaries ceaselessly and fruitlessly wonder what makes Japanese people so singularly resistant to Christianity. Theologies of mission recommend that, instead of towing along the whole cultural apparatus of the West, we should attempt to raise up an indigenous church, adopting Japanese cultural forms as far as possible, from philosophy to music to literary allusion. This has been tried for well over a century to no avail, as Mark Mullins's *Christianity Made in Japan* documents well. Better efforts could be made, for sure. But there are deeper problems with this theoretical approach, at least how we unreflectingly apply it. Christianity's modern advent in Japan coincided with one of the most breakneck cultural transformations in world history. Forced by American warships to break open its borders, Japan leapt into the modern world. In less than fifty years Japan destroyed the Russian navy, with all the industrial and technical capacity that that required. Railways, urbanization,

factories, democracy, civil society, mass education — all this upended the old and created a truly *new* Japan. All along the Japanese were reconstructing a national identity and a modern culture. Which is to say that there is now no consensus on what *is* Japanese. Continuities exist, for sure, and political discourse has its own reductionist opinions. But [Dragonball](#) and [One Piece](#) are not exactly classical Buddhist philosophy. How can Christianity be incarnated into a culture that is itself an erratically moving target?



A Shinto 四手 ([shide](#)) adorning a power pole

## “Christian” Weddings

One place where the Japanese have fully adopted overtly Christian practice is weddings. Or rather, the wedding industry. While walking around Yokohama I spied in the distance some lacy spires,

which upon closer examination topped an ornate Gothic chapel. I wanted to take a look inside, but was denied. It was, in fact, a wedding chapel, attached to a huge destination hotel. Paying guests only.



In the commuter trains, ads for wedding chapels abound. Happy couples dance:



Meanwhile, wooded retreats promise peaceful ceremonies:



Others merely offer good deals (from \$600 and up):



Christian wedding ceremonies far outnumber Shinto or Buddhist rituals, even though less than 1% of the population is Christian!

Since a Christian wedding carries no legal status, you don't need a "real" pastor to do the deed, just someone willing to play the role. An actor, preferably a white man. I'm told you can make a few thousand a month as a white guy who can passably pronounce the words in Japanese. I read an article by a Jewish guy who did it for years. Needless to say, most Christian

pastors won't go near this industry at all. I can well understand their sentiment: there's no interest in Christianity, only the white dress, the tuxedo, and all the gallant imagery from the movies. But such weddings are by now fully Japanese, that's for sure.

## Polyglotism

As part of my linguistic apprenticeship, I attended the seventh annual Polyglot Conference, conveniently held this year in Fukuoka on Japan's southern island of Kyushu. I rubbed shoulders with some of the world's most accomplished practical linguists: Richard Simcott (pictured below) of YouTube renown, who speaks twelve languages fluently, and the current director of Concordia Language Villages, Alexander Arguelles, who has studied over 100 languages.



Before coming to Japan, I had never thought of myself in such terms. I'd always liked (or at least didn't mind) studying other languages. That I should



learn Spanish seemed obvious— my hometown of Yakima, WA, was nearly 40% recent immigrants from Mexico. In college I studied Greek, as preparation for seminary. At Luther Seminary we all did Hebrew. I also received a scholarship from the German church to study German in Germany. I had to decipher a lot of Latin in graduate school (though I can't claim any great competence). And then I lived in France for nearly eight years, so of course I learned French.

Among the 400+ polyglots in Fukuoka, all this ranked me a bit below average. I was caught off guard but, in the context, unsurprised to overhear two Asian-Americans conversing in Swedish. While waiting for the train, a young German of Ukrainian roots chatted in Hebrew to a lad from Israel. It was certainly inspiring to be surrounded by such passion and optimism. All who had made the attempt agreed that Japanese was a hard nut to crack — much needed and encouraging words for me as I enter my second year of study.

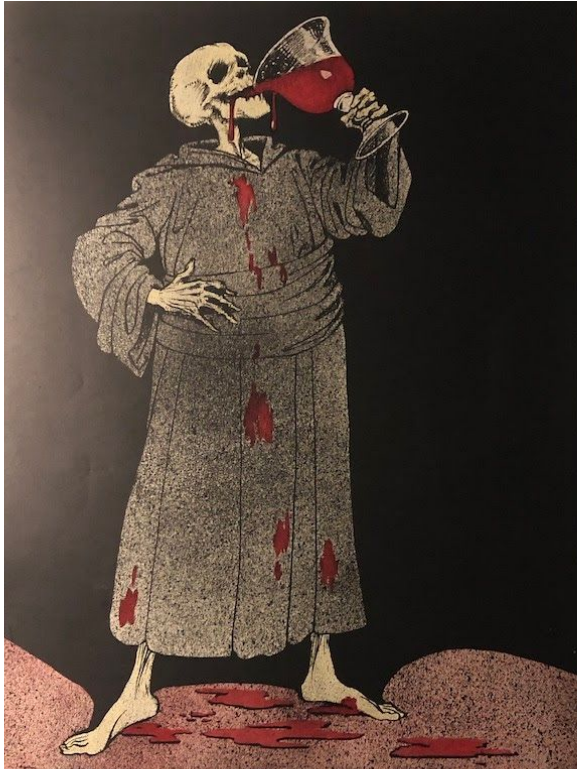
I'm making steady progress, studying, reading, attending class, and conversing for several hours every day. I even managed to preach a couple of times this fall — a group effort with generous help

from my tutors and colleagues. Prayers for my personal Pentecost are welcome!

## **Europe and War**

All three of us went to Europe for two weeks in November. Sarah taught her annual class on Luther's theology in Wittenberg. Zeke and I were there with her for a few days and got to know amazing pastors from Australia to Iceland. I was blown away by the tales of a pastor in rural Indonesia struggling to reform her 5000-member parish!

At the same time, though, during our visits in Germany and France, war and terror seemed to be the theme. As survivors pass away and the Cold War fades from memory, Americans are forgetting what was the bloodiest century in the history of civilization. Europe in the early- and mid-twentieth century was not a safe place to be at all, which is something to keep in mind as other regions broil in conflict today.



*"Cheers, Civilization!" Print from World War I*

If you've never been to Verdun or to Flanders Fields, they're worth the trip. These are not the triumphal arches of great capitals. They are the killing fields, pure and simple. We visited the hilly land near Verdun where shells dropped for nearly a year in 1916. Some three hundred thousand died; 85% of casualties came from the tens of millions of shells that rained down from afar. It was a moonscape by the time it was over, and the craters are still ubiquitous, burial mounds for the 100,000 missing.

The German National Museum in Berlin contains further shockingly honest

artifacts — ones church members should keep well in mind:



This embroidery, commissioned from the churchwomen by the pastor himself, once hung behind the chancel in St. James Church in Rothenburg an der Fulda, Germany. The supporting women stand below, their soldier husbands on top; to the left and right are the Hitler Youth and their female counterparts. And in the center stands the German church, Nazi flag flying from the belfry. I mention this not to distance our contemporary lives from past horrors, but to show just how cozy and comfortably the reign of terror settles in, almost unawares.

Our son Zeke, at the age of 14 right on schedule, is fascinated by soldiery, particularly the weaponry of war. Guns and armor are a boy's delight, which I remember well. The world is still large and threatening; we imagine ways to control the menace. We saw a nice assembly of unrusted, unrecycled war machines in the MM Park museum near Strasbourg.



To adolescent eyes, it's all power and victorious glory. Fields of graves and rivers of blood are oddly more abstract. As are the vicious, possessing ideologies that hijacked noble loyalties and comradeship to fulfill millennial visions of totalitarian control.

Durable peace requires an unvarnished appreciation for the real threats to family and civic life, which are both more and less obvious than we imagine. It means not being naive about our past. It means not naively chucking longstanding practices we hardly understand.



*"The Jew-eater" Worker's Parade float, 1939.  
Topography of Terror Museum, Berlin*

Our recent tours made live for me the need to remember the horror, not bury it. Nor should we toss out reasonable justice for unattainable perfection. Neither should we squander our liberties for perfect security. We must value mercy above foolish consistency. We must speak honestly. We must remain awake.



*Zeke and me at the Berlin Wall*



## Home and Christmas

These distant lands and dire thoughts brought us very far from our daily life, which is exemplary in its peacefulness. My father, Roger, came for a three-week visit, helping us greatly to unstick our stalled household projects. The college had its Christmas pageant, which turned into a passion play.



*Seminary President Ishii as King Herod*

We celebrated Christ's Advent and birth among the faithful and the curious at Tokyo Lutheran Church. Bells rang, children sang, the Gospel was proclaimed, as we keep the light faithfully and warmly glowing in the vast metropolis.

And now the new year, and a new decade has arrived. God came to us as a child two thousand years ago, that we might have life, that we may live and die with him.



And that we may be raised again into newness of life.

Many blessings for your new year. May it be filled with attentive expectation for the Advent of our Lord, in Japan, and everywhere.

—Andrew L. Wilson

## Thanks for your Prayers & Support!

Stay in with us at [sarah.wilson@elca.org](mailto:sarah.wilson@elca.org) and [andrew.wilson@elca.org](mailto:andrew.wilson@elca.org). To donate, visit [support.elca.org/goto/Wilson](https://support.elca.org/goto/Wilson). Checks are payable through your

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You can also follow Sarah’s theology podcast “Queen of the Sciences” and subscribe to her “Theology & a Recipe” newsletter on her website, [www.sarahhinlickywilson.com](http://www.sarahhinlickywilson.com).