

## Orthodox Liturgy in Japan: An Introductory Overview

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### Abstract

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The *Nihon Harisutosu Sei Kyōkai* (Orthodox Church in Japan) numbers approximately 10,000 members. Uncritical conservatism and concern for surface performance, traits generally characteristic of both traditional Russian and Japanese culture, have ensured that their liturgical tradition remains essentially that of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia translated into late 19<sup>th</sup>-century classical Japanese. The liturgical language is more distant from the contemporary language than Elizabethan English is from contemporary English. Only the very well-educated understand it easily, and reading it is challenging. The use of Greek or Slavic (rather than Latin) roots for borrowed names and technical terms means that even other Japanese Christians have difficulty recognizing them. This applies to basic Christian vocabulary such as "Jesus" or "Trinity."

The distinctly Japanese input into this tradition includes the assignment of great importance to memorial services and to New Year's Eve services (but not to other votive or occasional services, such as the churching of infants). Most feasts are transferred to Sundays in the majority of churches. Christmas alone is observed according to the Gregorian calendar as a concession to Japanese popular romantic expectations. Some Japanese religious observances, such as the blessing of 7-, 5-, and 3-year-old children in November, have found Orthodox expression. Many churches maintain Japanese custom by removing shoes in

the narthex. Sweetened glutinous rice is used for memorial services. Cremation is practiced, in contravention of Orthodox canons, as required by local laws.

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The Orthodox Church in Japan (日本ハリストス正教会, *Nihon Harisutosu Sei Kyōkai*<sup>1</sup>), is an autonomous daughter of the Moscow Patriarchate. Its rite is the Byzantine as transmitted by a Russian missionary, St. Nikolai (Kasatkin) (1836–1912), during the Meiji era (1868–1912). The “1996 Report on the Strength of the Religion” (1996年度教勢報告 (*Sen kyūhyaku kyūjū roku-nendo kyōsei hōkoku*), which summarizes statistics about church membership for the period 1 June 1996 through 31 May 1997, lists 69 churches, organized into 50 religious corporations. Although there are three dioceses, currently there is only one bishop, Metropolitan Theodosius (Nakajima), who was ordained in 1971. There are 22 priests serving full-time. It is very difficult to find men willing to serve as priests, and a common pattern is to ordain older men once they have retired. There are currently only two seminarians in Tokyo, although an Armenian and a Japanese-German-American studying in Moscow have expressed interest in serving the Japanese Church. There are two protodeacons (one the stepson of the other), four deacons, six subdeacons, and one catechist. Nationwide, the total number of church members was 9,777, women outnumbering men 5,360 to 4,417, possibly due to longer lifespan. There were 76 baptisms and 104 funerals. Immigration

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<sup>1</sup> The untranslated *Harisutosu* (“Christ,” from Greek Χριστός through Russian Христо́сь) is a shibboleth, distinguishable from the Western Christian キリスト (*Kirisuto* from Latin *Christus* through Spanish and Portuguese *Cristo*).

outpaced emigration, keeping the total loss in membership down to four for the year. But it is clear that the church is not growing.

### *The Cultural Context*

There is no “Japanese Orthodox Rite” in the sense of a distinct liturgical tradition. No self-conscious attempt at indigenization, such as has occurred among Western Christians in India and other countries has taken place. Two characteristics of Japanese culture, ritualism and traditionalism, make such developments unlikely. The principal, and sometimes only, concern in many situations is for the maintenance of surface harmony and propriety. This trait has many benefits. Millions of tired people can crush themselves into overcrowded trains twice daily without murdering one another. On the other hand, groups both large and small will occupy themselves with ostensibly voluntary activities that none of their members personally value or desire. Group dynamics ensure the continuance of the activity and discourage questioning of any kind.

The preferred learning style is repetition: performing actions the same way hundreds of times until perfection is attained. This is true of many East Asian cultures, but the Japanese stand out in this respect. Compared with Westerners, the Japanese tend to focus far more on form, assuming only one form to be correct; less frequently do they concern themselves with meaning, rationale, or function. This does not bode well for liturgical creativity.

Japanese Orthodox have reinforced the ritual formalism of the Russian tradition in ways that are sometimes unfortunate. Practices peculiar to that heritage remain intact. For example, deacons may not distribute holy Communion, not even to the dying, when priests are unavailable. The Divine Liturgy is never celebrated in the evening, even when the typicon prescribes it. Confession is required before each reception of holy Communion with only rare (and *ad hoc*) exceptions. Non-Orthodox Christians may not be married to Orthodox spouses in the Church.

Such strictness sometimes engenders oddities: People, invited by the priest, may decline to go to confession on Sunday morning, claiming they’ve eaten breakfast, only to get in line later and receive communion from that same priest. Also, this author knows