Preliminary Report on the Joint Tosa Folklore Project:
Use and approaches of Virgin Mary statuary, then and now – a Tosa perspective

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Abstract: Japan’s hidden Christian community is a unique and fascinating aspect of the long story of life on these islands. Although the Catholic faith was relentlessly suppressed by official pressure and periodic arrests, detainments, tortures, even executions, somehow a small community of believers persisted in their practices. Of special note was the usage amongst this group of statues of the Virgin Mary that were disguised as those of the Bodhisattva of Mercy Kannon. A new museum related to this period and containing some of these statues opened last year in Nagasaki City’s well known Oura Church, and Kochi City’s own Enoguchi Catholic Church has a direct connection with this group and this history. It is my intention to explore these avenues with a focus on the experiential feel and the approaches to Mary statuary use in both the past and the present, the philosophical implications of such, and the potential crossroads thus demonstrated between the phenomenology of iconography and art. The below is an introduction to a work that has only recently been undertaken yet nevertheless appears to be promising.

Keywords: hidden Christians; image; kakure kirishitan; Kochi (Tosa); Nagasaki; phenomenology; Virgin Mary iconography and statuary

1. The Image

There. There, right in front of you, there she is. She? A block of stone, wood, an object, inanimate. A toy really, a prop. Yet all the world, worth risking your life for, worth dying for, worth hundreds of actual deaths. Possibly thousands. Still though, it is nothing, it is an immobile mass, a chunk of matter, no different than a rock when viewed objectively. Who, however, ever views anything objectively?

Japan’s hidden Christians of the Edo Period (1603-1868) certainly did not. These kakure kirishitan, centered in what is now Nagasaki Prefecture, created and kept statues of Mary, the mother of the Jewish man Yeshua who would be transformed into Jesus the Messiah under the directing hands of Christian theology as it stretched itself out over the centuries following his death. This person and his journey, from itinerant Jewish would-be reformer to popular Jewish (informal) rabbi to son of God to anointed Son of God to God it/him/herself, provides a story beyond fascination – but it is not ours, not now. Instead we turn back to his mother and her own path from Mary plain and simple to Mary the Blessed Virgin, but not only as she is
understood in mainstream Catholic teaching, rather more so in the peculiar form of Catholicism that came to be established on this archipelago and that would survive centuries of official repression.

Yet we must press the focus further still as our view is not even that wide: beyond Mary the individual we are concerned with how Japan’s Christians viewed the statues and images of her that they shaped, how they approached these items historically and how they approach them today. Towards this end we will consider the Mary statuary of Japan’s hidden Christian period, icons of disguised “Mary”s that were presented as Kannon, Bodhisattva of Mercy, in order to elude and – here we tread on questionable theologico-ethical grounds – deceive the authorities of the Tokugawa Shogunate who had outlawed the foreign faith. Juxtaposed with this historical angle we will also engage our topic from a contemporary perspective: the view from Tosa in the form of the Enoguchi Catholic Church, one of Kochi City’s best established Catholic institutions that also has a direct historical connection with Japan’s hidden Christians. We will endeavor to discover, following a phenomenological methodology and with a constant eye on the philosophy of art, what it is that worshippers think of and feel towards these “objects” that for them fill the very core of (Christian) being. We will examine the senses in which statuary and iconography may be considered in religious contexts, how the use of the image has changed historically in “pre-art” and “art” contexts, how believers of the Edo Period might have considered their icons and how believers today may – where, I think, vastly important differences will arise –, and finally we will consider what the felt importance of such “things” can be for any one of us given the centrality of the notional to human life. In the course of this study a recurring, and perhaps highly instructive, refrain will be: The conceptual determines the perceptual. How so is a matter we will (hopefully) come to “see”.

2. Thinking the Tactile Divine: Images, Statuary, Phenomenology
   — Introducing a project underway

My research in this area has only just begun and there remain many loose strands which will need to be collected, tied up and looped round the final (as yet tentative) goal of trying to better understand the manner, quality, and degree to which human subjective experience can be asserted and applied to religious imagery within the limiting conceptual framework of Japanese (Roman Catholic) Christianity. What might the phenomenology of statue interaction be for these believers? What might it have been during the time when Christianity was outlawed? What might the applicable philosophy of art elements be for those of us who are not fellow believers, who hold differing – to whatever extent – intellectual approaches to the items of faith involved? Such are the issues that I hope to make some headway towards, although I cannot expect to accomplish much beyond an informed speculation, particularly regarding the historical aspects. Still, it seems to me worth the effort, and whatever may or may not be left undone the enterprise promises to teach much about Japan’s folkways and her people’s
journeys.

In this initial set of research notes I have little of weight to offer, but some preemptory comments may be made. To begin, to try and get into the mindset of those who may think (very) differently, we can set out some situational parameters regarding symbolism and the place of the symbolic in our lives. John D. Caputo, in commenting on Paul Tillich’s theology, remarks that:

I think that Tillich gets it right when he says that speaking of God like this [re: Thomas Aquinas’ position of God as “being itself”], as if God were a personal agent, personifying God, is an unavoidable but “symbolic” way to talk about what is deepest in our lives and in reality. The mythological sets in when we literalize the symbolic, when we forget that the symbol is a symbol.¹

This literalizing of the symbol, this forgetting of the symbol’s position as symbol, is perhaps one of the more common phenomenon in all manner of religious rite and thought, regardless of the particular practice in question. The divine, whatever it may or may not be, must ultimately be so other as to be ineffable, at least in its fullness and for us within our limitedness. Yet as the Greek philosopher Plotinus pointed out in the third century, we still speak and we still write and we still spend all manner of energy on describing the divine because we feel we must and can do no more – cannot do less –, such are the creatures we are.² Along these lines the Buddhist Zen tradition has given us the wonderful analogy/caution of the finger pointing at the moon: We tend to stare at the would-be instructional digit and completely miss the great shining orb to which it attempts. Is this a risk that Mary imagery runs, or ran?³

The danger seems present. In the Orthodox heritage we find Mary described as the “container of the uncontainable”,⁴ a paradox that, in its mystery, forces the mind onto what such a container might be or might mean, what such an attribute might infer. Yet Mary, we know, was a person like you or me, and whatever merit(s) she may be accredited with as the chosen “mother of God” she does not have anything near the theological overlay that her son Yeshua would achieve on his way to becoming the Christ.⁵ Mary is not God and therefore is inevitably – intuitively – more approachable than the all powerful and all knowing judge who is presented as God in the monotheistic faiths. Her function in Catholicism, moreover, is that of a mediator between us and her son, between us and God, bequeathed by adherents to “pray for us sinners”⁶ (that is, pray on our behalf, but also deliver our prayers as a conduit out of which

³ Caputo, op. cit.
⁵ The “Hail Mary” prayer reads in part: “Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of
requests are thought more likely to be positively heard, given her stature), and so the result would appear to be a conceptual framework in which Mary receives believers' attention to the neglect of the divine itself. That this is was no idle worry can be seen in the addition of Section 67 to the Constitution on the Church at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) which is careful to state that the "gifts and privileges of the blessed Virgin [Mary]...always have Christ in view". It would not have been necessary to put this corrective so directly had Christ truly always been/be in view. Thus, while statues in Catholic practice may be intended to serve as reminders of people deserving veneration (Jesus, Mary, the various saints), the line between the object as symbol or reminder and the object as itself venerable object is surely an easily blurred one. At what point do prayers directed to Mary in heaven when facing a statue of her become prayers directed to the statue, either taken as Mary or as a manifestation/inhabitation of her?

Images and objects can have a strange power over us, particularly when they are connected to conceptualizations that we take to be important or foundational. Jean-Luc Nancy writes that:

It [the image] does give the signification of this pressure [i.e. the passion it evokes]: in that sense, the image has no object (or "subject", as one speaks of the subject of a painting), and thus it is devoid of intention. It is therefore not a representation: it is an imprint of the intimacy of its passion (of its motion, its agitation, its tension, its passivity). ... The image touches me, and, thus touched and drawn by it and into it, I get involved, not to say mixed up in it.

There are two points I wish to highlight here: the first is that the image is not a representation – which is really to say that the image is not an image at all but something far more (transcendental?) than its physical presence, and second that one gets "mixed up in" the image, that one's self – and with it all of the connected identitarian and existential elements – connects in a fundamental way with the image; again, we might conclude, thereby producing a blurring of lines and an imparting of experiential life into that faced in moments of (in this concept) spiritual yearning.

Along these lines we may recognize how the notional picture held affects – quite heavily – not just the interactive elements of worshipper-image relations but also the perceptual ones. In an earlier work on art (as art, not as art-cum-religious symbol/icon), Nancy also wrote that this world, or possibly better these worlds, of "life and activity" that we each inhabit is/are, "less a sensuous world than an intelligible world of markers, functions or uses, and transitivities – in

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our death"; see Michael Walsh, Roman Catholicism: The Basics, 2nd edn (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2016), p. 139.

6 ibid, p. 147.

7 ibid.


— 92 —
the final analysis less a world, perhaps, than a milieu, an *Umwelt* [life-world]. 9 The final reference here should be understood in the Husserlian and Heideggerian senses of “horizon”, of “world” (the German *Umwelt* is in fact Husserl’s terminology): the fully embedded contextualization out of which an individual perceives all that surrounds her and from which she comprehends and behaves towards absolutely everyone/thing. Due to the manner in which the conceptual determines the perceptual an object can act as a freeze frame, as an extracting but also injecting tool of being, or rather of being-in-the-world. Thus the biblical prohibition of idols, Nancy tells us, is not in regard to any status of “imitation or copy, but rather in terms of its [the idol’s] full and heavy presence”, 10 a presence which surely – on the biblical view – threatens to carry the believer away from the divine as awe-inspiringly inconceivable and into this thing before one, sensuously available and easily graspable, both mentally and tactically. The (theological) fear is that the result will be a reduction of God’s unimaginable majesty.

It is interesting, and useful, to explore further along these lines via a study done on modern usages of statuary in religious contexts that takes relationalism as its point of focus. Amy Whitehead provides us with just such a look at two very different communities: one a Neopagan group linked to a modern temple of the Glastonbury Goddess of southwestern England, and the other a Catholic devotional and pilgrimage site to the Virgin (Mary) containing a shrine to her in Alcalá, central Spain. 11 Although the Glastonbury believers engage in some intriguingly similar rites and practices in their worshipful employment of objects as the Marian devotees do, we will here focus on the latter as its Catholic setting and Mary centeredness parallel our own concerns.

Somewhat dissimilarly to the official Church line of statuary ritualism serving as reminders of those deserving veneration (referred to above), Whitehead situates the usage as coinciding with Catholicism’s stance on transubstantiation (that the bread and wine of the Eucharist service literally becomes the flesh and blood of Christ during its ingestion), and writes that this belief regarding imagery reflects that held by the early Church in Christianity’s initial founding years as well. 12 Essentially this is pointing to an accepted inhabitation. I think this may however be theoretical overreach on Whitehead’s part as in Protestant Christianity – which takes different views on the Eucharist – as well the symbol of the cross is widely used in prayer and worship and arguably serves similar functions at least some of the time for believers that statuary and other images do in Catholic contexts, fully absent any notion of an indwelling.

Nevertheless, Whitehead finds in these practices a statue-devotee relationalism that is claimed to be “mutual” and that “emerges from the unique, personal, even intimate relationships that take place between human and other than human beings”. Definitionally she

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12 ibid
characterizes this relating as animist and as involving (or creating) both a personhood and a subjecthood for the statue itself, with the caveat that this occurs in engagement and “the new animism [i.e. contemporary thinking on animism] is not implying that objects are ‘living’ all the time...[but] are, however, ‘alive’ when they are participating in relationship”.13 As for the personhood of a statue when it is not being engaged, Whitehead claims that we simply cannot know about the status of such. It will be understood that a statement such as that runs counter to modern physicalist intuitions – we are far more likely to simply deny personhood/subjecthood to inanimate objects –, and to me this is also indicative of a slight fuzziness in Whitehead’s work regarding the concepts she treats. Allow me to expound.

Let us pause to spend a moment on this animism as it is espoused by Whitehead as I believe that in continuing my research in this area I will find similar concerns come to the fore in Japanese Christians’ use of Mary statuary, both past and present. Whitehead contends that, “From an animist perspective, all something needs to be ‘alive’ is for someone to relate to it, have a relationship with it or treat it [in (sic.)] particular ways that point towards subjecthood instead of ‘objecthood’.”14 To me this reads as being wholly arbitrary, and any personhood (“aliveness”) that might or could be assigned to the object in question is entirely dependent on the antecedent actual and biological personhood of the relater – without a human person engaging the inanimate in the first place the question of the object’s being “alive” would seemingly never even arise. In other words, without having life thrust onto it from the physically living the statue – any statue, any thing – would remain no different from any other unshaped block of material: mere stuff. Still, the act involved on the part of the “life granter” (if we are inclined to agree with Whitehead regarding this ontological status, which, for my part, I am not) does point us in a more beneficial direction: that of the phenomenology experienced by the believer herself.

Although we may doubt that any personhood or subjecthood could be granted to a statue as such, when a worshiper prays or sacrifices to/at/with a devotional object it is clear that from the devotee’s point of view the material is being treated far differently from any other material, whether the object employed in the practice is regarded as “only” symbolic of the divine, as a reminder of the divine, as a manifestation of the divine, as an inhabited vessel of the divine, or in any other spiritually associative manner. When it comes to this, Alfred Gell writes:

> the works of art, images, icons, and the like have to be treated, in the context of an anthropological theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency. In this context, image-worship has a central place, since nowhere are images more obviously treated as human persons than in the context of worship and ceremonies.15

13 ibid., p. 100 and 102, respectively.
14 ibid., p. 103.
We must note the nuances here, and be careful to differentiate them from the claims that Whitehead is making. The two key terms are: “person-like” and “treated as”; Gell is not putting forward a case for considering the “works of art, images, icons, and the like” to actually be persons or subjects in the way that Whitehead does, rather he is stressing that as far as the demonstrably (human) personhood-holding actor goes the objects are thought of as such. We might note that this could be only for the duration of the engagement or that the believer might always think of the object in that way, yet even in the latter case such would not impart definitional personhood/subjecthood to the object as the worshipper would have to either be actively using or thinking about the statue (image, symbol, et cetera) for the question to be applicable. At all other times the thing is just a thing;¹⁶ or so I wish to argue.

One final consideration on this point that Whitehead raises, and this too I suspect will become a major focus of my further research, is the distinction between fetishistic and animistic treatments. For an object that is a fetish it is purely and perforce non-representative, and is therefore understood by the interacting believer/devotee in the sense of “the spirit of the matter”, while in animism the view is more akin to habitation and thus “the spirit in the matter”.¹⁷ The difference between that “of” and that “in” is a significant one. Within a Catholic setting Mary statuary would clearly only run the risk (that is, “risk” from the Church’s point of view as pertaining to its theological teachings) of being treated in an animistic manner should a believer pray to rather than towards an image of Mary; our concerns, however, are more complex in that they involve Japanese believers who were/have been raised in a culture whose dominant and indigenous belief system (Shinto) is, on this definition, more fetishistic than animistic. In traditional Japanese religious thinking nature not only contains the divine, nature *is* the divine: the “spirit in the matter” but also and even more so the “spirit of the matter”. When *kakure kirishitan* of the Edo Period engaged with their statues as subjects, and when contemporary Japanese believers do so today, is the understanding more akin to “spirit of” or “spirit in”? This is one more avenue I will need to pursue.

The last set of issues that I wish to raise in this preliminary explication of research that is only just begun has to do with the historical and the conceptual. Writing from the perspective of art’s history in the Western world Arthur C. Danto introduces the notions of “pre-art”, pointing out that religious images produced prior to around the year 1400 cannot really be considered art as such since the intentions of their producers were otherwise, that is, spiritual rather than aesthetic.¹⁸ In the specific case of Edo Period hidden Christians this aspect becomes even more fascinating as not only were the makers of the disguised Mary statues

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¹⁶ Unless, again, we agree with Whitehead’s position and state that at all other times we simply don’t know what happens to the object’s personhood – maybe it remains or maybe not.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *op. cit.*

concerned with religious rather than artistic matters, they were also focused on physical self-preservation and not being discovered by the authorities, hence the quasi-Kannon formations that their imagery took. Although it is true that the entirety of the Edo Period fell well after Danto’s benchmark of 1400 I think that it is valid (or at least arguably so) to group pre-Renaissance European creators of iconography with pre-Meiji Japanese makers of the same due to the similarity of the feudal forces and trends that shaped the cultural trajectories involved. It seems reasonable to conclude that an Edo Period Japanese Christian and a Medieval European Christian would have a similar view of an item associated with their personally held faith in contradistinction to any aesthetic considerations that may (or, more likely, may not) occur to them vis-à-vis the object itself. Attempting to enter the mindset of the historical believers in such ways could help us in our quest to understand the phenomenological dynamics involved between past and contemporary usages of Mary imagery. In contrast to this, Danto further relates how modern art need no longer even be something physical, it could “only” be conceptual, and that what matters now is our relationship, our engagement with the artwork itself.19 This too is relevant to our research in aiding how we may analyze approaches today, but not only today since – again – the conceptual determines the perceptual to such a vast degree. Hans Belting, precisely in line with our concerns, has noted how the power (for believers) of Virgin Mary images has very little to do with representational accuracy.20 This thought – the non-necessity of (pure) representation – once more recalls our preceding musings on the fetishistic/animistic boundaries regarding objects of/for/in worship. The lines we have thus far drawn are starting to come together.

The importance of the embedded factors facing and affecting each devotee and each community of devotees must also be kept firmly in mind when seeking a comprehension of their relations with icons, and such is of course merely one more aspect of the importance of the conceptual adhered to by the users of the imagery. How any of them – or us, or anyone ever – interacts with the world in which they find themselves – that world which partially creates and fully structures the breadth of their being – will ultimately be limited by elements of historical Zeitgeist and cultural milieu. As Heinrich Wölfflin put it, “Not everything is possible at all times, and certain thoughts can only be thought at certain stages of the development.”21

On this aspect of history’s arc and the individual’s placement within it, Danto summarizes our situation as that where, “One can without question imitate the work and the style of the work of an earlier period. What one cannot do is live the system of meanings upon which the work drew in its original form of life.”22 This is indeed essential: Whatever “system of meanings” or “embeddedness” or “world” or “associative networks”, or however one may wish to label that

19 Danto ibid.
22 Danto, op. cit., p. 203.
which forms the framework upon which our mental – and therefore total – lives are based may be, its reach into all areas of a person’s existence cannot be overstated. Such is complete; it is from within and out of that whereby our time on this earth is spent. The conceptual determines the perceptual.

Mary, statue, image, icon, symbol, relic, reminder, manifestation, representation, real companion, inanimate object, item, treasure, trinket, truth. How were these statues viewed in their contextual setting? How are they viewed now? What might the implications be for the phenomenology of religious items? For art? For the intersection between person, object, and thought? These are the questions that I will pursue in the undertaking of this project.

3. The Route from Here: A Proposal

My initial plan for the remaining bulk of my research is to explore both the new Christian Museum at the famous (and registered National Treasure) Oura Church located in Nagasaki City and the Enoguchi Catholic Church found here in the Shinonomachi section of Kochi City. By traveling to Nagasaki and witnessing for myself some of the previously undisplayed Kannon/Mary statues and learning the history of the hidden Christian communities of the region I hope to fill out and inform my thinking on how these statues and other images may have been phenomenologically approached by Japanese believers in the past. Such will no doubt prove to be of great assistance in discovering connections and commonalities with present practice. Oura Church has moreover recently (July 2018) been granted World Heritage status collectively with a number of other sites all located in Nagasaki Prefecture. As the wider world starts to recognize the unique contribution this part of the Japanese story represents I think a deeper examination into some of the more specific aspects involved is very much in order.

To ascertain what present practices and usages of Marian imagery amongst modern Japanese believers might entail, and to do so from a local Tosa perspective, I plan to contact the priest of the Enoguchi Catholic Church and either interview him regarding his thoughts and experiences on the matter and/or distribute a survey to the church’s adherents requesting that they share some descriptions of personal experiences of prayer and worship with/towards statues and images of the Virgin Mary. This church has been chosen for its major position within Kochi’s Catholic community and for its relation with Japan’s kakure kirishitan subcultural group. Enoguchi Catholic Church was first established in 1938 and rebuilt after the war following its destruction in the 1945 fire-bombing of Kochi City. Its location was decided upon due to its

23 The church’s official website can be found here: https://nagasaki-oura-church.jp/; and the page for the new museum is here: https://christian-museum.jp/. Both sites accessed January 16, 2019.
proximity with the old Enoguchi Prison, a place where sixty-four hidden Christians arrested and forcibly exiled from Urakami Village in Nagasaki Prefecture were detained after a government crackdown on believers in the first year of the Meiji Era (1869). Thus there is here a direct line between Japan’s previous generations of believers and its present, its disguised and its open religious iconography.

Moreover, in an attempt to maintain a balance between the long road of the past and the one now being trod, I will expand my reading to stretch it across the theological, experiential, philosophical, and sociohistorical. In this I will naturally focus on Catholic thought regarding the place of Mary and considerations of spirituality, the particular texts and systems of Japan’s hidden Christians (a group whose beliefs diverged interestingly during their long (Edo Period) isolation from the Church proper), and a phenomenologically-driven philosophical study pertaining to ideas and notional directions on the divine and on the artistic. Where all of this might take me remains to be discovered, but the leading threads are intriguing and thought-provoking. Of special note is the tantalizing prospect of finding an overlap or intersection between that which is deemed holy and that which is deemed art. It may prove to be the case that the impulse driving both is one and the same, and what that in turn could mean for our common human nature is surely a query worth pursuing.

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