

the challenge of culture

Less than 2% of the population in Japan are Christians. Checkpoint interviews Maiko Watanabe about the chal

Checkpoint: Maiko, you have lived in both Australia and Japan. Is the Christian church the same in both countries, or are there any cultural differences?

Maiko: Church culture is quite different. For example, it is commonly understood within many of the churches in Japan, that teaching the Bible is the role of pastors, and people who are theologically trained. Most church meetings during a week are usually run by the pastor. It is unusual to see lay people involved in ministries, such as leading Bible study groups.

When I first joined meetings and Bible study groups at a church in Sydney, I was surprised to see that lay people were actively involved and leading meetings.

CP: As a Japanese Christian, do you ever find that your traditional culture conflicts with living as a Christian?

Maiko: Yes, it does.

'Religion' in Japan is usually understood as visits to a shrine or temple during the New Year holiday and on special occasions such as weddings, children's blessings and funerals. Japanese people go to pray for their happiness and protection from evil spirits.

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For example, my family follows Buddhist practices for our family traditions. We had a funeral for one of our relatives this week. My mum wanted both my sister and myself (we are the only Christians in our family) to attend the Buddhist service. She knows that we do not follow Buddhist practices, however, she expects us to pay respect to relatives by attending the service.

CP: So what did you do in that sort of situation?

Maiko: We visited relatives at the place where the service was on the day before the funeral. On our way there we both prayed that God would give his comfort to them.

This kind of event has happened many times since I became a Christian. I do struggle with family commitments and time commitments. I try to follow family commitments without following Buddhist practices.

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On the other hand, I wonder how my non-Christian parents see us and if they understand why we are being different from our relatives. Being different from others is a very big thing in Japanese culture. Their salvation is my daily prayer point.

Another example is that it is common in Japan to work under lifetime employment. There are less opportunities to work part-time, even for someone with a career. When you

have a look at my situation with the view of this culture, my work (full-time ministry work supported by a grant from CMS-Australia for three years) is considered unusual. It has no security for the future.

It is not easy for my non-Christian friends and family to accept that God is holding me in his hands. I try to be a witness of God by serving him this way.

CP: As you seek to be a witness to God, what values, beliefs or worldviews have you found to be most 'alien' to the gospel of Jesus?

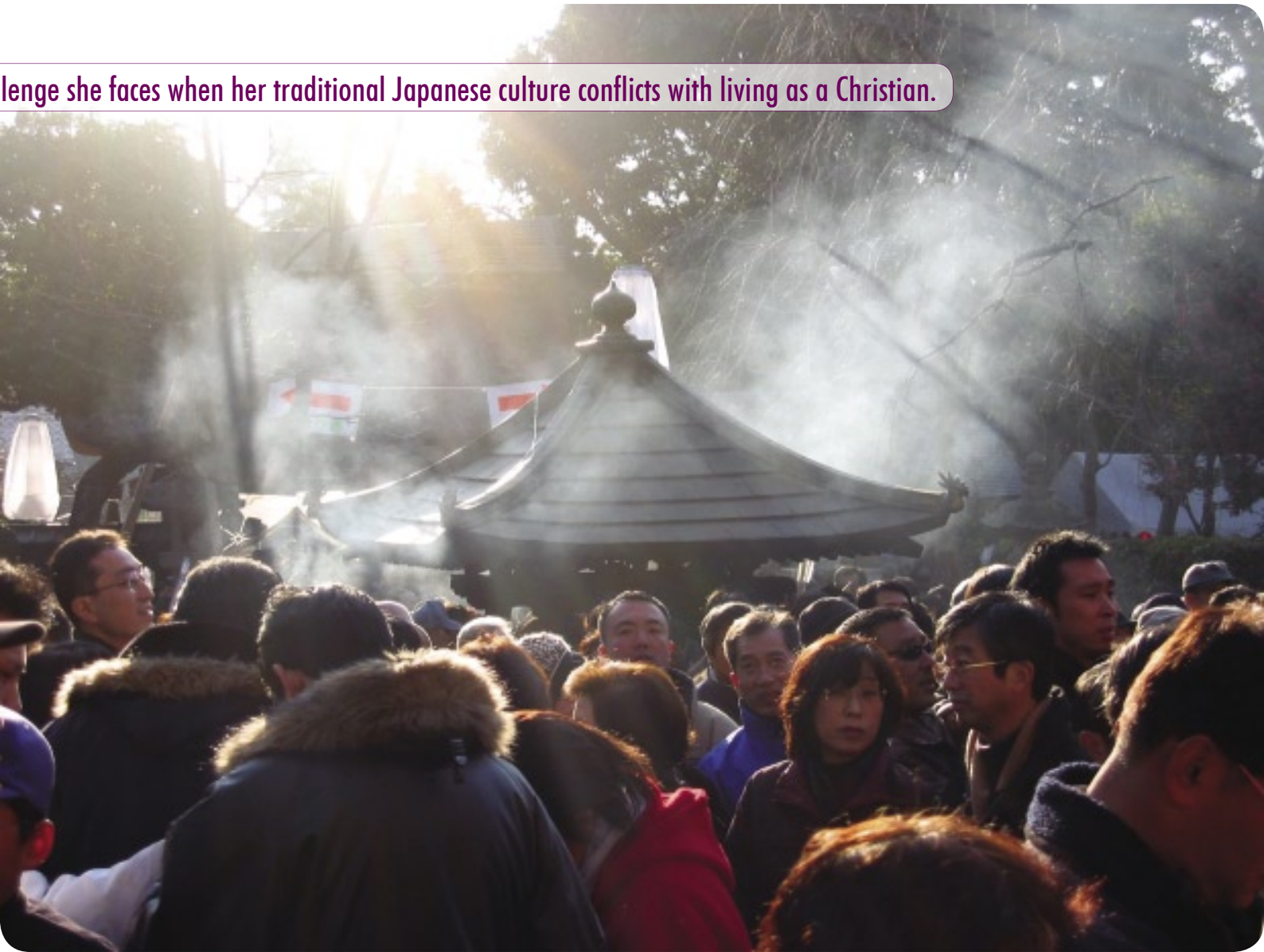
Maiko: Many non-Christians believe that the character of god is spiritual, something we are unable to see and that god is something which protects them from evil spirits. It is probably an influence of spirituality and the new age focus of the media. Many visit temples, shrines or any other places to ask for evil spirits to be driven out.

Yet, on the other hand, God in the Bible is the Creator and the ruler over his creation. This is a totally unfamiliar idea to Japanese people.

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So in Japanese churches a seeker often becomes a Christian after regularly attending the service for two years or more. It takes time to come to know the true God because there are so many ideas and beliefs about gods in Japan and they confuse people.

challenge she faces when her traditional Japanese culture conflicts with living as a Christian.



An incense mist covers a crowd of people attending a temple. Photo: Aron Kremer

“We have to wrestle with the reasons why people reject the gospel, and in particular give due weight to the cultural factors. Some people reject the gospel not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be alien.” – John Stott



Maiko (left) is involved in church work, ministering to women, running Bible studies and sharing the gospel with students.

CP: So do you have any handy hints for us in Australia? What should our attitude be to culture when we are trying to reach people for Christ, including those from other cultures?

Maiko: People from other cultures do have different ideas. I would like to encourage you to respect them and their ideas. You could listen to them and try to understand them instead of just talking about your Christian view. You might be able to provide a better presentation of the gospel by understanding other cultures.



Maiko (left) grew up in a non-Christian family but became interested in Christianity during a college home-stay program in the USA. When she returned to the USA a few years later she became a Christian. After studying theology in Australia, Maiko is involved in full-time ministry in her home country, Japan.