

## **Listening to the Wishes of the Dead: In the Case of Dr. Nagai Takashi**

Takahashi Shinji, translated by Brian Burke-Gaffney

The name “Nagasaki” tends to conjure up images of Christian persecution and the devastation caused by the atomic bombing, and, indeed, it is these two aspects of the city’s history that are best known both in Japan and abroad. Ever since moving to Nagasaki I have been engaged in an undertaking which I call “Philosophizing in Nagasaki,” and in the course of my related studies I encountered a person who is deeply connected with both of the above aspects. That person is Dr. Nagai Takashi.

One of the conclusions to which “Philosophizing in Nagasaki” took me was the call to “listen to the wishes of the dead,” an important formula molded from modern studies on life and death within the greater scope of holocaust research. Looking at this formula in the present essay, I will suggest that Dr. Nagai’s Catholic faith, while coming under the influence of both traditional Japanese culture and the contemporary social climate, was induced by the deep faith of the anonymous Catholic congregation of Nagasaki.

### **Physician and Scientist**

In his autobiographical novel *Horobinu Mono Wo* (“Something Unperishing”), Nagai Takashi (1908-1951) writes that his ancestors descended from Ippin Shinno, son of Emperor Heijo (reigned 806-809), and that they served for generations as managers of the medicinal herb garden run by the Matsue Clan. This is supported by the inscription on the gravestone of Nagai’s grandfather which states that he had been a physician.

Nagai’s father Kan was a truant who chose farming in favor of graduation from elementary school. But it seems that he suddenly changed his mind at the age of twenty and decided to follow his ancestral footsteps in the medical profession, becoming a “student” at Tano Hospital in Matsue and later obtaining a practitioner’s license without ever undergoing formal university medical training. Released from filial responsibilities, he married Yasuda Tsune and accepted an invitation to a tiny rural community where he opened a practice and spent the rest of his life working as a “village doctor.” This background no doubt fueled the hopes of Kan and Tsune that their eldest son Takashi would rise above the mediocre status of village doctor and go on to become a renowned scientist.

Nagai’s decision to study at Nagasaki Medical College (predecessor of present-day Nagasaki University School of Medicine) has been called an enigma because he had excellent grades at Matsue Middle School and Matsue Senior High School and seemed assured of a place at the imperial university in Tokyo or Kyoto. Much to the astonishment of his friends and relatives, however, he chose faraway Nagasaki Medical College where entrance examinations had been deferred because of the low number of applicants the previous year.

I personally see no mystery in his decision. He chose Nagasaki because it is the cradle of Western medicine in Japan, the place where, in the year 1834, Philipp F. von Siebold established his *Narutaki-juku* for the education of Japanese students in the fields of natural science. And in no way did he disappoint his parents’ hopes that he would become a great physician and scientist. Although confined to bed with leukemia and atomic-bomb injuries, he continued to peer through the lens of his microscope, striving as a radiologist to exploit his chance encounter with the world’s second

atomic bombing, producing works such as Genshi Igaku ("Atomic Medicine") and Genshibyo Ga-iron ("Remarks on Atomic Disease") and leaving behind numerous other works of writing like the poem:

Tama no wo no inochi no kagiri ware wa yuku

shizukanaru shinri tankyu no michi

I will travel, as long as there is breath in my body,

The untroubled road of inquiry into the truth.

People close to Nagai often sharply criticized him for being "theatralisch" (theatrical). This assiduous work in his sickbed, however, was not the performance of a showman but rather Nagai's travels on the "road of inquiry" in heed of the wishes of his deceased parents.

### **Shintoism, Materialism, Catholicism**

The grave of Nagai Takashi's father is located on the hillside behind the farmhouse-cum-clinic in the village of Mitoya, Iishi-gun, Shimane Prefecture where Nagai spent his childhood. The inscription on the gravestone indicates that the family religion was Izumo Taisha Shintoism, namely devotion to the glory of the Japanese imperial family and the prosperity of Japan and its people as espoused by the taisha ("grand shrine") of Izumo in Shimane Prefecture. One of the reasons for this affiliation between Izumo Taisha and the Nagai family, whose descendants were physicians, was undoubtedly the fact that the tutelary god of the shrine, Okuninushi-no-Mikoto, is the deity of healing and medical care.

After leaving home Nagai became an proponent of materialism. "It was the Taisho Era," he wrote later about this period. "Society was crying the praises of science, calling it the solution to all problems. Materialism was the object of faith. Among young people at the time it was a disgrace to use the word religion." When he came to Nagasaki and saw the Christian faithful here his only response was to deprecate them as "the slaves of Westerners, hoodwinked into clinging to an obsolete faith." How then did Nagai Takashi come to be converted to the Catholic faith after passing through stages of adherence to the Shintoism of his parents and ancestors and the materialism and communism popular among his peers?

While advocating materialism and rejecting the notion of a soul, Nagai witnessed the look in his dying mother's eyes and, as he wrote later, "intuited" the fact that she "had a soul that may leave the body but still endures for all eternity." Furthermore, after reading *Les Pensées* by Pascal he became aware of the existence of "three orders," that is, the presence of a soul in addition to the human mind and body. Thus released from the grip of materialism, Nagai took up lodgings in the Urakami district of Nagasaki. The house where he took up lodgings was that of the Moriyama family who had served as leaders of the hidden Christian community during the long period of persecution.

Ryukichi [Nagai's name for himself in the novel] embraced communism as a student and showed an interest in the social reform movement. But when he came here [Urakami Yamazato village], he realized that his ideal economic realm already exists in this world without any struggle. The only difference between the communist village and Urakami is that the latter is governed by love.

Nagai's first contact with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church was the catechism sent to him by his future wife Midori, the only daughter of the Moriyama family, while he was in China serving as a member of the Hiroshima Infantry Regiment.

A specialist in radiology, Nagai was exposed to large doses of radiation from his frequent use of x-rays and involvement in other radiological treatments, and in June 1945 he was found to be suffering from chronic myeloid leukemia. He gave himself three years to live on the basis of this diagnosis, and he wrote later about the unforgettable evening that he informed his wife of this prognosis:

"The sight of my wife facing away from me and trembling in the flickering light of the candle seemed sacred, and I found myself lowering my head toward her in reverence."

Through his wife Midori, Nagai underwent a deep spiritual experience of "sacredness."

### **For the Glory of God**

The atomic bomb dropped by American forces over Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 devastated Urakami Cathedral and killed about 8,500 of its 12,000 parishioners. One of the Catholic faithful killed instantly by the bomb was Midori, Nagai Takashi's beloved wife.

Nagai returned to the ruins of his house three days after the explosion and collected the ashes of his wife and her rosary. Although he had suffered a serious wound to the head, Nagai devoted himself to the care of the atomic bomb victims as director of the activities of the Nagasaki Medical College No.11 Medical Team. But he continued to mourn the loss of Midori, like Job in the Old Testament, refusing to shave or to cut his hair for more than half a year. He remembered that evening when he informed Midori about the gravity of his illness, how after sobbing and praying she had said, almost smiling: "Both living and dying are for the glory of God." Nagai ruminated on this mantra-like sentence until his very last day on earth.

In his first book, *Rozario no Kusari* (The Rosary Chain), Nagai reveals the intensity of his resolution: "My mind is occupied with the one thought for the glory of God'. My health is ruined and thus I may not be able to make any significant contribution. But I will devote all of my dissipating energy to this one thought and serve the wishes of God until my dying breath."

Fr. Nakata Totaro, pastor of Urakami Cathedral after the war, advised Nagai to take care of his health when he saw how frail the physician was becoming, and he reported later that Nagai had replied, "Thank you Father, but if it's for the glory of God, living and dying are just the same," once again showing his tenacious adherence to the words of his wife. Indeed, it had been Midori, Nagai's lover and wife, who had guided him in his inner faith. A skilled seamstress, she had enveloped the physical Nagai with her own handmade clothing everything from socks to shirts and overcoats while tending to him in his spiritual faith like a godmother.

When speaking to contemporary young people, I relate the story of Moriyama Midori and Nagai Takashi as a romance entitled *Midori et Takashi: Les Amants en Nagasaki*.

### **From a Folk Religion to a World Religion**

It is a well known fact that Nagai had two children, a son named Makoto and daughter named Kayano, and that they lived with him while he was bedridden at Nyokodo. Grieving over the inescapable reality that they would soon become orphans, he focused tremendous love on them

and also displayed profound affection and concern for the future of the many other children who had lost their parents as a result of the atomic bombing. A lesser known fact, however, is that Takashi and Midori had lost two other children prior to the atomic bombing. After the death of his wife, Nagai described her joyous reunion with the two deceased children Ikuko and Sasano: “I could see the two spirits run joyfully and cling to the sides of their mother’s spirit newly ascended into heaven, and I looked forward more than anything else to the day when my own spirit would ascend to join them.”

At the time, re-marriage was a common solution to the problem of motherless children, but Nagai rejected all proposals and suggestions from others that he should find a new mother for his two children, his reason being unbending belief in the coming “reunion” with his wife and dead children.

William Johnston, S.J. of Sophia University has referred to Nagai Takashi as a “mystic,” indicating the perception in Western eyes of something transcendent in Nagai’s faith. This is no doubt intrinsically connected with Nagai’s adoration of death and the dead. “The woman,” wrote Nagai, “who comes to be my wife my flower bride will be death . . . I will make death my wife.”

Nagai Takashi was a person who could “listen to the wishes of the dead.” He listened to the wishes of his parents, to the wishes of his two lost infants, to the wishes of his beloved Midori, and he made life decisions on the basis of what he heard.

This ability to listen to the wishes of the dead was consistent with his ability to listen to the message of Jesus on the cross, which can probably be summarized from Nagai’s writings as the following three points: “for the glory of God,” “love others as you love yourself,” and “may peace reign.” Nagai frequently wrote the wish *heiwa wo* (may peace reign) on *shikishi* poem cards. It should be remembered, however, the background of this wish was not only the appeals of the atomic bomb dead but also the countless deaths that he had witnessed on the battlefields of China. It was a cry of grief from the living for the dead, a desperate tear-filled scream of hatred for aggression and warfare.

It needs to be mentioned in closing that although Nagai’s conversion to Catholicism caused a rift between him and his father, the traditional beliefs of the Nagai family, namely Shintoism and ancestor worship, actually fortified Nagai’s Catholic faith. The filter of traditional Japanese spirituality brought a unique ambience to his Catholic faith and guided him in his personal religious journey.

We can recognize here an historical instance of the injection of new vitality from a specific localized belief into the faith of a universal religion, the contribution of Japanese culture to the universal teachings of a world religion.

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