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Reviewer: Rev Chris le Roux (Eikenhof)

'Although the Kakure Kirishitan have lacked the circumstances or simply the desire to write or rewrite their own history, they did, however, compose one unforgettable work — *The beginning of heaven and earth (Tenchi Hajimari no Koto)*: Their sacred tale. But without knowledge and experience of the Kakure Kirishitan, this fascinating and bewildering amalgam of legends and tales is difficult to interpret.'

With these words the author of this book summarizes the content of the book. It is a translation of *The beginning of heaven and earth*, the Bible of the Kakure Kirishitan, a small and underground group of *hidden Christians* in Japan. In a fascinating tale he discusses the coming of Christianity to Japan in a long introduction. After the first Europeans (the Portuguese) landed there in 1543, a man from Kagoshima named Yajiri, who was wanted for manslaughter, escaped to Portugal aboard a Portuguese ship. In Portugal he was baptized in 1548 and studied at the Jesuit College of St Paul. His contact with the Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, resulted in the starting of the Jesuit evangelization movement in Japan. By 1579 converts to Christianity there already numbered 100,000.

More important for the aim of this book is the change in attitude towards Christianity and the persecutions that followed. The all-important edict of 1614, condemning the Christian religion as the opponent of Confucian morality, Buddhist law and the Shinto way, cannot go unmentioned, because that edict resulted in Christians being compelled to recant their faith and prominent Japanese Christians being sent into exile. Those who did not comply were subject to *divine punishment*. Many Christians accepted martyrdom rather than deny their faith, while others opted to conceal their religion — the beginning of the clandestine Christian tradition.

Around 1629 under the constant threat of terrible persecution, an estimated 150,000 Christians went underground. In 1680 the brutal attitude worsened to form the climate in which the Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians), the descendants of Japan's first Christians, continued to practise what they remembered of the Catholic faith. But the Bible was never translated into Japanese and the missionary strategies of the time meant baptizing as many people as possible with the minimal amount of indoctrination. The result was that the knowledge of these Christians was highly questionable. There was also a constant shortage of priests. The number never exceeded 137 — to administer to a congregation of 300,000 at its height. Today the ancient religion appears to be evolving in the direction of assimilation into neighboring religions.

When Japan's isolation came to an end in 1854, French priests went to Japan to restart the missionary activities, but only in 1865 the Kakure Kirishitan were discovered by the priest Bernard Petitjean, the first person from outside their circle to receive a copy of their Bible, a work known as *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* (*Beginning of heaven and earth*). The text is divided into fifteen chapters with an approximate length of 14,300 letters. The origin of the Tenchi and different manuscripts is discussed in detail in the book.

The title of this book is misleading: *The beginning of heaven and earth: The sacred book of Japan's hidden Christians*, translated by Christal Whelan. In reality the translation forms only a relatively small part of the book, twenty-eight pages out of a total of one hundred and thirty-three pages. The book contains a long introduction, discussing the history of Christianity in Japan as well as the origin of the Kakure Kirishitan, followed by the translation. The translation is followed by a lengthy discussion of the text under the heading *Notes*, as well as a complete bibliography and index. Although this title is misleading, the rest of the book is necessary for an understanding of the reason for the existence of this text and religious group, whose existence was a well-kept secret for a long time.

Another reason why the title might be misleading is to be found in the phrase *Japan's hidden Christians*. But the history and the contents of the book show that they are not Christians in the true sense of the word. It may be very interesting to read the *Tenchi*, but it is clear that it is far removed from the text of the Old and New Testament, and the syncretism of Buddhist and Christian traditions is notable and reminiscent of the earlier commingling of Buddhism and Shinto. This coexistence is revealed in telling phrases like this one: *As for the one you worship as Buddha, he is called Deusu, Lord of Heaven. He is the Buddha who introduced the salvation to help humankind in the world yet to come.*

The author highlights these problems with the text, as well as other idiosyncracies, like Adam and Eve, after eating the apple, offering a prayer to the Virgin Mary, or the impossibly long trek Mary would have had to make in traveling from the Philippines to Bethlehem.

The following observation of the author is of the utmost importance in judging this text: *The Tenchi tries to Christianize the native Japanese elements and succeeds in Japanizing Christianity. For this reason the best definition of the work might be to call it indigenous theology, a folk gospel, or a Japanese Christian apocryphal text.* Why then is it necessary to translate the text, or even take note of its existence? Because, as the author puts it, this highly imaginative text seems the best vehicle through which to introduce the Kakure Kirishitan people.

This book is fascinating to read and helps to unfold a world that was hidden for a very long time. Was there ever any other religious group that existed underground for such a long time?