

## Evaluating Kazoh Kitamori's Doctrine of the Atonement

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us. (Eccl. 1:9-10)

### INTRODUCTION

The visible growth of Christianity in the non-Western world has been phenomenal. Alongside this growth has been the call for indigenized theologies to arise to re-contextualize theology for non-Western, non-Greco-Roman cultures, with a view towards giving meaning to "ancient traditions" which were denigrated by Westerners.<sup>1</sup>

In this light, Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori (北森.嘉蔵) has been hailed in the West for coming up with the first indigenous Japanese theology, although Japanese theologians are not as excited about Kitamori's theology as the West seems to be.<sup>2</sup> Kitamori claimed to be re-contextualizing Luther's theology, especially Luther's dichotomy between the *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*, and between the *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus*, and Luther's idea of the *communicatio idiomatum*, to come up with his own theology of pain (*theologia doloris*).<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I look at Kitamori's theology of pain as it relates to his view of Christ's atonement. I then interact with Kitamori's theory of the atonement, show its lack of biblical support and that it does not address the core problem of sin, and that is a heresy against the Christian faith.

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<sup>1</sup> John Parratt, "Introduction," in John Parratt, ed., *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5-12. This practice is called "inculturation," which is the "re-unfolding of the message of Christ in a particular context so that it brings forth a new experience of real Christian life" [Earnest D. Piryns, "Japanese Theology and Inculturation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24:4 (Fall 1987): 536]

<sup>2</sup> Richard Meyer, "Towards a Japanese Theology: Kitamori's Theology of the Pain of God," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33 no. 5 (May 1962): 263; Akio Hashimoto, "Legacy of Kitamori in Contemporary Japanese Christian Thought," *Missio Apostolica* 12 no. 1 (May 2004) : 12; Anri Morimoto, "Foreword," in Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (translator unknown; originally 神の痛み of 神学, Tokyo, Japan: Shinkyō Shuppansha, 1958; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 1. Hereafter cited as *TPG*

<sup>3</sup> Kitamori, *TPG*, 105-116

## KITAMORI'S DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

Kitamori claims to believe in the substitutionary atonement theory advocated by the Reformers.<sup>4</sup> In the same way as he claimed to be recovering Lutheran theology and re-contextualizing it in the Japanese cultural context, the question before us however is not what he claims but what the substance of his theory is.

Presupposing what he perceives to be Luther's view of the *communicatio idiomatum*, Kitamori claimed to recover a facet of theology that can only be discovered through the lens of Japanese culture, the universal truth of the pain of God.<sup>5</sup> Utilizing Jer. 31:20 and Is. 63:15 as the Rosetta stone and prism for interpreting Scripture, Kitamori interprets these texts as teaching the inner feeling of pain that God feels towards His people.<sup>6</sup> While disavowing patripassionism, Kitamori claims that God really and truly suffered, and that this pain is of the essence of God.<sup>7</sup>

God is pained as He loves people who are the objects of His wrath.<sup>8</sup> God desires to embrace those who cannot be embraced, and the dialectic between His love and His wrath results in a *tertium quid*, His pain.<sup>9</sup> The death of Christ on the cross is God's way so that he could embrace the un-embraceable.<sup>10</sup> Through loving Christ in experiencing and participating in His pain through feeling our own suffering, *tsurasa* (辛さ) or pain-bitterness, in light of the Cross, sinners are saved from the wrath of God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Meyer, 268

<sup>5</sup> Kitamori, *TPG*, 137

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 151-67

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-6. Kitamori disavowed patripassionism in *Ibid.*, 15, 115

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-7

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-4, 133-8. Edmond Tang, "East Asia," in Parratt, ed., 91

Kitamori views Christ's atonement at the Cross therefore as the event which sinners must individually partake in analogously and subjectively in order to be saved.<sup>12</sup> Christ's atonement is not vicarious or substitutionary, but rather every believer is a "servant of the Lord" who is saved by personal participation in the pain of God manifested at the Cross and mediated through our own pain (*tsurasa*), a theory of the atonement that I term the existential union participatory theory.<sup>13</sup>

Kitamori does not seem to grasp the essence of the substitutionary theory of the atonement, mistakenly identifying his theory with some version of it. In this respect, he attacks the legal or "mechanical or impersonal aspects" in the traditional substitutionary theories of the atonement.<sup>14</sup> In his view, by refusing to see the "pain of God" motif, traditional substitutionary theories of the atonement are no different from classic liberalism.<sup>15</sup> To the contrary, Kitamori's theory of the atonement, by making the atonement subjective and participatory, rejects its substitutionary character.<sup>16</sup>

## PROLEGEMONA: AUTHORITY AND SOURCES

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-4. "The gospel is not a mere *objective* fact standing outside us; it is at the same time a *subjective* fact always including us" (*Ibid.*, 33; Emphasis original).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-70. This is in contradiction to Meyer who accepts Kitamori's assertion at face value (Meyer, 268). It is also in contradistinction to Arata Miyamoto who claimed that Kitamori's "theology of the cross presupposes a theology of reconciliation on the basis of the satisfaction theory. ... the disclosure of divine acceptance of sinners with his broken heart" [Arata Miyamoto, *Embodied Cross: Intercontextual Reading of Theologia Crucis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 35].

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, 268

<sup>15</sup> Kitamori, *TPG*, 92-3

<sup>16</sup> If the Gospel is subjective requiring faith and personal participation (Kitamori, *TPG*, 33, 52-4), then Christ's work on the Cross does not actually accomplish salvation but rather the sinner must complete his salvation by having faith, which is defined by Kitamori as participation in the pain of God. Also, a subjective atonement makes the change taking place in the being of God and not primarily in Man's relation to God [Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 373, in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996)], something which Kitamori agrees with (Kitamori, *TPG*, 20-21). The atonement cannot therefore be vicarious, because Christ's death is insufficient to pay for sin but rather personal participation in the pain of God is required to complete the atonement. It cannot be substitutionary, for Christ did not pay the price for salvation but rather merely creates the manner by which Man can participate and suffer likewise for their own salvation (Kitamori, *TPG*, 52, 57). It is not a moral influence or government theory since in some sense Christ's death did do something *actual* for his people that they cannot do for themselves,

Before looking into Kitamori's theory of the atonement, it is instrumental to look at his notion of authority and his sources. It can be clearly seen that Kitamori's *theologia doloris* is based upon his reading of Jer. 31:20 and Is. 63:15, and his entire theological edifice is built upon his interpretation of these texts with the utilization of Lutheran theological categories.

In the next section, I look at these two key texts. Suffice it is to say that basing one's theological edifice upon a particular interpretation of two texts of Scripture is extremely tenuous, especially since there are other ways of interpreting these texts. Kitamori has also misunderstood and misapplied Lutheran theological categories, which even if they are correctly represented have to be proven not just assumed to be biblical before they can be utilized in theological discourse.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kitamori misrepresents Luther's view of the *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*. Kitamori takes the *theologia crucis* as representing theology "comprehended only from the 'word of the cross'" and *theologia gloriae* as theology that is ashamed of the revelation from the cross (Kitamori, *TPG*, 47). Luther however meant by *theologia crucis* the theology that finds Christ in the "weakness and scandal of the cross" as opposed to the "rationalistic theology of the [Medieval] scholastics" which is *theologia gloriae* [Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 300, 302; See also Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 20]. Likewise, Kitamori's idea of the *Deus absconditus* is that "God sends man into hell and death not to kill him, but to give him real life" and his idea of the *Deus revelatus* is Christ in pain revealing the *Deus absconditus* in pain (Kitamori, *TPG*, 108, 114). This is different from Luther's view of the *Deus absconditus* as speaking of God's unknowability, and *Deus revelatus* as speaking of God's self-manifestation (Muller, 90). While Luther uses these categories to differentiate between speculative philosophy about God *in se* and true theology of God as revealed in His Word, Kitamori erases the Creator-creature distinction and attempts univocal knowledge that God has. Kitamori's idea of the *theologia crucis* has formal acknowledgment of the Cross but it is not materially derived from seeing the Cross as a redemptive historical event, and therefore in substance is similar to the speculative rationalism of the medieval scholastics; the *theologia gloriae*, instead of Luther's *theologia crucis*. His usage of *Deus absconditus* does not reflect on God's incomprehensibility but rather treats God *in se* as an object to comprehend through using the *Deus revelatus* as a thematic idea, to peer into the very essence of God.

Kitamori further distorts Luther's view of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Luther's view of the *communicatio* teaches of a "communication of divine properties to the human nature of Christ" (Muller, 72). It does not speak of the communication of human properties to the divine nature of Christ, much less the Godhead [Kazoh Kitamori, "Is 'Japanese Theology' Possible?" *Northeast Asia Journal of Theology* 3 (Sept 1969): 85, as cited in William McWilliams, "The Pain of God in the Theology of Kazoh Kitamori," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 8:3 (Fall 1981): 190] Thus, when Luther said of Christ that "God died," the nuancing is that of God in the person of Christ dying, not God in Christ's divine nature dying.

Lastly, Kitamori distorts Luther's view of the relation between suffering and the Cross. Luther's view of mortification is that which is not meritorious but as evidence proceeding from true faith (Loewenich, 122), whereas Kitamori takes pain and suffering as being done unto salvation (Kitamori, *TPG*, 53)

In addition, it can be seen that Kitamori has been influenced in part by Japanese Buddhist elements, especially the Buddhist philosopher Hajime Tanabe and Japanese traditional drama-theatre (*kabuki*—歌舞伎).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in the area of authority or the *principium cognoscendi externum*, Kitamori has from the start rejected the Reformed principle of *Sola Scriptura* in favor of “contextual theology.”<sup>19</sup>

## DOCTRINE OF GOD

Kitamori exegetes Jer. 31:20 and Is. 63:15 as support for his doctrine that God feels pain just like we do, focusing especially on the Hebrew words *הָמַח* in Jer. 31:20 and *יָמַח* in Is. 63:15 to prove his point that God feels deep pain and love towards Israel.<sup>20</sup> In his defence against the charge of patripassionism, Kitamori dismisses the charge because his view has the suffering of God coming from within not without the being of God, and it is the pain of not merely God the Father but the Father and the Son as essentially one.<sup>21</sup>

The main problem with Kitamori’s doctrine of God is that he has discounted the notion of anthropomorphism (and anthropopathism) altogether, a catholic not merely a distinctive Reformed doctrine.<sup>22</sup> Although he has indicated cognition of Luther’s and Calvin’s view, Kitamori simply

<sup>18</sup> Piryns, 545; Kitamori, *TPG*, 133-8. The concept of *tsurasa* after all comes from the *kabuki*.

<sup>19</sup> “The true absoluteness of the Gospel will be realized only when we take into consideration such opposing standpoints as Buddhism and Oriental thought and *feel responsible for them*” [Kazoh Kitamori, “Christianity and Other Religions in Japan,” *Japan Christian Quarterly* 26:4 (Oct 1960): 232. Emphasis original]. The Reformed position is seen clearly in Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 1.6 and Belgic Confession (BC) article 7

<sup>20</sup> Kitamori, *TPG*, 154

<sup>21</sup> Edmond Tang, “East Asia,” in Parratt, ed., 91; Kitamori, *TPG*, 115. Formally, Kitamori could be exonerated of the charge because he does not posit God the Father *physically* suffering and dying on the Cross. “...he [Kitamori] is especially concerned to avoid basing his argument on a simple projection of Jesus’ pain onto God’s character...” (McWilliams, 187). However, by making God the Father participates in the suffering through a misunderstanding of the Lutheran doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, he is still guilty of the charge on the material level.

<sup>22</sup> Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 151-5. Charging it as being “Greek” and thus part of the Hellenistic captivity of the church (Kitamori, *TPG*, 130-3), Kitamori ignores the fact that Greek popular religion has very much mutable and human gods like Zeus, and in contrast, there is an immutable principle in Buddhism (*mu* 無 or *kuu* 空, nothingness or emptiness) [Kitamori, “Christianity and Other Religions,” 234]. [Note: for “*kuu*” I chose to transliterate the *ofurigana* into *romaji* without contraction of the vowels, as contrary to the transliteration used in the article]

ignores them.<sup>23</sup> Rather, he insists on his interpretation based upon his contextual framework derived from Japanese culture with its view of *tsurasa*.<sup>24</sup>

Kitamori's errant doctrine of God has implications for his theory of the atonement, as it affects how God interacts with sinners.

## SIN AND THE WRATH-LOVE DIALECTIC

Traditional Reformed theology with its penal vicarious substitutionary theory of the atonement maintains that the atonement is an objective legal fact which God did on behalf of sinners.<sup>25</sup> It sees sin as an offence against God's justice, and therefore only a legal payment is acceptable to propitiate God's wrath.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, Kitamori comes to the issue of the atonement from a starkly different presupposition and worldview. While preserving the language of sin, love, and wrath, he redefines their references. Sin is not considered as a forensic moral offence. Rather, sin is primarily relational, breaking God's original paternal love for Man.<sup>27</sup> In order to embrace Man, God has gone out to "satisfy" His wrath by sending His Son to die on the Cross. The problem according to Kitamori is not the stench and disgusting thing that sin is to God (Is. 64:6), but rather that God's

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-4

<sup>24</sup> With his theology being a vaunted "contextual theology," it is interesting to note that Kitamori's book originally appeared in 1946 after the defeat of Japan in World War II, and thus "it is incontestable that the Japanese suffering of World War II played a key role in Kitamori's formulation of the theology of the pain of God" [Randall E. Otto, "Japanese Religion in Kazoh Kitamori's Theology of the Pain of God," *Encounter* 52:1 (Winter 1991): 37-8]. As one whose ancestors have suffered under the cruel inhumane barbarity of Japanese occupation, I find this contextual reason shockingly insensitive and naïve.

<sup>25</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 373, in Berkhof; WCF 8.5

<sup>26</sup> On sin, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 231-3 in Berkhof; Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 129-136; WCF 6.6. On the need for a legal payment, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 370 in Berkhof; Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 160-3, 337-40; Heidelberg Catechism (HC) 40, Canons of Dordt (CD) 2.1, WCF 8.5

<sup>27</sup> Kitamori, *TPG*, 118

wrath because of Man's sin prevents God from loving Man. God therefore *really* wants to love Man, but is unable because His wrath prevents Him from doing so.<sup>28</sup>

Kitamori then utilizes Hegelian dialectics to resolve the conundrum God supposedly is in.<sup>29</sup> God's love and God's wrath function as the thesis and the antithesis to produce the synthesis of God's pain manifested at the Cross and mediated in our suffering.<sup>30</sup> Phrased another way, God's smooth paternal love (first order, thesis) faces opposition due to sin which generates God's love in sending His Son away from Him (second order, antithesis), and these two are synthesized in the recovery of our smooth, intense love through the pain of God in our *tsurasa* (third order, synthesis).<sup>31</sup> The atonement for Kitamori therefore is the resolution of sin via the Hegelian dialectical method.

There are many biblical and theological errors with Kitamori's atonement theory. Having dealt with Kitamori's denial of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, I add that such a view makes God a schizophrenic.

Next, the Hegelian dialectic is not taught anywhere in Scripture. It is fundamentally irrational also, which ought to discredit it totally since illogical notions such as a square circle are propositionally vacuous—they are mere verbiage meaning nothing.<sup>32</sup> More to the point, it does not truly resolve the problem of God's wrath. Merely claiming dialectical resolution by combining two opposites neither makes the process valid nor the synthesis true. In Kitamori's system, God's wrath is somehow propitiated by God's pain and suffering on the Cross, but no explanation is

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21. "Here heart is opposed to heart within God" (*Ibid.*, 21)

<sup>29</sup> Miyamoto, 52

<sup>30</sup> Kitamori, *TPG*, 62-4

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-22

<sup>32</sup> One explicit irrational statement in Kitamori's book is as follows: "in the mysticism of pain, *we become immediately at one with God who denies immediacy*" (*Ibid.*, 74. Emphasis original)

given for this leap of logic. Kitamori does of course define sin relationally, but even if we accept his anthropocentric idea of the *analogia doloris*, no human relationship in this world is reconciled by the suffering of the offended (as opposed to the offender which may have punitive value) so it is hard to see how God's pain for the purpose of conquering wrath is supposed to be analogous to our pain. In the Bible, God's wrath is propitiated by the punishment of a substitute (Rom. 3:25), but such is not present in Kitamori's non-forensic system. Of course, Kitamori could adopt an anti-realist definition of God's wrath and thus resolve the paradox, but such is contrary to Scripture which speaks of God's wrath as an actual thing against sinners (e.g., Ps. 2: 5; Rom. 1:18) and also contrary to our own experience. After all, an unreal wrath does not mean anything.

Sin is defined in Scripture as a moral and spiritual failing which deserves death (e.g. Rom. 1:18-32; 3:23). Therefore, by redefining sin as relational and non-forensic, in Kitamori's theory the atonement does not truly expiate the sins of Man, since relational and non-forensic "sins" do not need to be expiated, just forgiven. Since Kitamori's primary problem is how God will overcome his wrath not how God deals with Man's sin, his theory only focuses on the theme of propitiation.<sup>33</sup>

On the contrary, the Scriptures make it plain that expiation is the alternative to actual punishment for sin, which is both relational *and* forensic (Lev. 1:4). The imagery that כפר in the piel puts forward is that of atoning by offering a substitute.<sup>34</sup> In like manner, Hebrews 9:7 speaks of the Old Testament priests as offering sacrifices to expiate sins for himself and the people (προσφέρει ὑπὲρ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τῶν τοῦ λαοῦ), an action which Christ undertakes in offering himself once for all on our behalf (Heb. 9: 28, 10:10). Expiation resolves the problem of sin by providing a

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<sup>33</sup> "The pain of God is the forgiveness of sins" (*Ibid.*, 40)

<sup>34</sup> R. Laird Harris, "כָּפַר," in R. Laird Harris et al., eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 452-3

substitute to bear the punishment of death. Contrary to Kitamori's system, sin is indeed forensic and therefore expiation is required.

Kitamori's theory of the atonement also denies the definiteness and the redemption motif of the atonement. By making pain and suffering primary, the idea of *tsurasa* makes Jesus' death merely a bitter-pain (*tsurasa*) tragedy requiring our own *tsurasa* without actually purchasing anything definite, which contradicts Scripture as it claims that Jesus died *definitely* to save His people (Jn. 10:15, Rom. 8:34, Jn. 17:8-9). It also ignores the biblical texts that speak of God's redemption of us (Rom. 3:24, 7:6; Gal. 3:13; Col. 1:14; Titus 2:14).

Lastly, I independently consider the existential union motif in Kitamori's atonement theory. The biblical position on union is that union with Christ happens subjectively to a person on the basis of Christ's work on the Cross (Rom. 6:1-11; Gal. 2:20) in the process of redemption applied, not that union with Christ is the human participatory act to complete Christ's work on the Cross for our salvation (in redemption accomplished).<sup>35</sup> On a larger theological level, given the great gulf between the Creator and the creature, God as *sui generis* does not share a univocity of being with Man, and thus there is simply no way for Man to be united with Christ apart from God's own condescension. To think that Man can contribute anything to Christ's own work is sacrilegious.

## CONCLUSION

Kitamori's existential union participatory model of the atonement has been examined and found wanting. At the start, it distorts the teachings of Luther, it is not based upon Scripture alone, it has a heretical doctrine of God, it utilizes the unbiblical Hegelian dialectical methodology, and it is fundamentally irrational and self-contradictory. On the atonement proper, it has a doctrine of propitiation that contradicts Scripture and a redefinition of God's wrath that is not actually

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<sup>35</sup> On the biblical Reformed view, see Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 523.

appealed. The doctrine of expiation is denied altogether, with Kitamori holding a defective doctrine of sin. Lastly, Kitamori embraced the univocity of being between God and Man thus erasing the Creator-creature distinction, ultimately making God qualitatively the same as Man.

Akio Hashimoto has said that Kitamori's legacy is to establish that the "God of the Bible, as revealed in Jesus the Crucified, is neither foreign nor strange to the Japanese experience of human misery and tragedy."<sup>36</sup> William McWilliams has conversely criticized Kitamori's theology as being concerned for moral evil but not natural evil.<sup>37</sup> McWilliams' criticism is unwarranted because Kitamori's theology is basically Japanese Buddhism in Christian dress, or "a recasting of the Christian religion in Buddhist terms."<sup>38</sup> Buddhism after all is generally more concerned with one's moral salvation towards Nirvana rather than social activism. Therefore, Kitamori's theology of the pain of God has jettisoned all but lip service to Christianity and the Bible, and its theory of the atonement is little different from Japanese Buddhist ideas of salvation, with Kitamori even claiming that Christianity gives the idea of real pain and real love lacking in Buddhism which has a mere abstract pain and suffering and love.<sup>39</sup>

Dogmatically, Kitamori has embraced the heresies of Patripassionism, Pelagianism, Gnosticism, and the Anthropomorphite error. Kitamori's theory of the atonement is heresy against the catholic faith, being just a remix of old heresies in a new form and exotic cultural dress. As Solomon remarks in his wisdom, there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9-10) and we should reject it just as the Church has done to its theological predecessors in the past.

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<sup>36</sup> Hashimoto, 15

<sup>37</sup> McWilliams, 198

<sup>38</sup> Otto, 43

<sup>39</sup> Kitamori, TPG, 17; Kitamori, "Christian and Other Religion," 233

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