

## Tenpukuji Temple

A temple of the *Soto* school of Zen, Tenpukuji was founded in 1688 as part of the temple registration system designed to detect and eliminate Hidden Christians by forcing every household to be affiliated with a specific Buddhist temple. The Higashi-Kashiyama area where the temple stands was administered by the Saga domain, whose lords were far less brutal in their persecution of the Christians than those of many other domains. Both sides benefited from the presence of the temple: by registering, the Hidden Christians could pass themselves off as good Buddhists, while the Saga domain could stay in good standing with the shogunate by denying the presence of Christians in lands it controlled.

The Hidden Christians who nominally belonged to Tenpukuji were fairly frank in their repudiation of Buddhism. They had their own “sutra-annihilating prayer,” for example, which they would recite when taking the body of a fellow Christian to the temple for the required Buddhist funeral rites. The words of the prayer—“The temple is your enemy. Don’t trust the people there. You are on your way to rejoin Mother Mary”—were openly anti-Buddhist.

In fact, so hospitable to Christians was the Higashi Kashiyama area that there was a saying: “One visit to Kashiyama is equal to three visits to Mount Iwaya [a popular site for prayer]. Three visits to Kashiyama is equal to visiting the church of Santa Ecclesia in Rome.”

For the temple, however, there was a downside to this tolerant attitude. When the Japanese government lifted the prohibition against Christianity in 1873, Tenpukuji’s congregation split into three groups of roughly equal size: Hidden Christians who reverted to traditional Catholicism; Hidden Christians who stayed loyal to their peculiar faith; and Hidden Christians who decided to become fully fledged Buddhists. Having had 450 households in the parish during the Edo period (1603–1868), the temple now has only 180, all of whom belong to the last group.

The temple building was reconstructed in the 1980s, and so is relatively new. There are, however, some interesting old objects. The most important item in the temple’s main hall is a 50-centimeter-high Maria Kannon statue that was brought here for safekeeping during the Third Urakami Crackdown of 1856. The serene facial expression is thought to resemble that

of the Virgin Mary. There are even traces of blue paint—the traditional color of Mary's mantle—on the statue's head.

Rosaries and medals of the Hidden Christian community and the sooty bamboo tubes in which they were concealed above the domestic fireplace are on display in the parishioner's hall.