

Article

The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Faith: Catholic Lapsing, Belief, and the New Evangelisation in Japan

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Abstract: This paper explores the phenomenon of lapsing among young Japanese Catholics, highlighting how both local and translocal experiences of Roman Catholicism shape the ebbs and flows of faith for our interlocutors. While global Catholic events such as World Youth Day can reignite faith by fostering a sense of belonging to a larger, global Church, the contrast with the small and socially isolated Catholic community in Japan often precipitates lapsing. This study examines the influence of the New Evangelisation, which promotes active belief and translocal unity, and argues that this movement can both strengthen global Catholic identity and exacerbate feelings of alienation in local, non-Catholic societies. Ultimately, we stress, in the context of Roman Catholicism, that lapsing should not be seen as simply a rupture in faith but as part of a continuous, if turbulent, Catholic identity, mediated by translocal flows of belief and institutional authority.

Keywords: religion; Japan; Catholicism; lapsing; New Evangelisation

1. Introduction

One evening at Sophia University, a Catholic university in Tokyo, attendees at the Catholic student group Emao decided to draw and present “faith graphs” [*shinkō gurafu*] representing their religious lives. These graphs were fairly simple line graphs indicating the trajectory of one’s level of faith on the Y-axis over the X-axis of time, with the rise and fall of the line marking significant events to indicate where there had been sharp drops, rises, or plateaus.

One student named Saori presented her graph. She shared that she had been a fervent practitioner of Catholicism in her childhood, having been baptized as an infant and raised with pious grandparents—indicating the highest points of her faith, located during the beginning of her life. Saori had gone to a Catholic kindergarten and subsequently a Catholic middle school, high school, and university (Sophia). But her elementary school was public—i.e., not Catholic—and she recounted how, during this period, she encountered a classmate with whom she attempted to speak about Catholicism. When Saori approached this boy, she—as a devoutly Catholic child—“naturally” [*atarimae no yōni*] asked him, “Who is your guardian angel [*shugo no tenshi*]?” Weaving in English phrases into her Japanese, Saori described how the boy was taken aback and confused by the question and looked at her with an expression that read to her as saying, “Huh? Are you crazy?!”

At this, Saori pointed at the sharp drop in the line on her graph, indicating a dramatic decline in her faith from that moment. It then plateaued at a very low level for many years. She explained that that instant precipitated an enduring sense of insecurity for her, that this encounter with the boy was when she started to feel conflicted about what it meant to be a believer and how it made her different from the other Japanese people around her.

She did indicate the occasional spike in her faith later on. One was when she attended World Youth Day, an international event organised by the Catholic Church, in Madrid



Citation: Ngo, H. Francisco, and Christine Lee. 2024. The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Faith: Catholic Lapsing, Belief, and the New Evangelisation in Japan. *Religions* 15: 1402. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111402>

Academic Editor: Kevin M Doak

Received: 6 October 2024

Revised: 15 November 2024

Accepted: 17 November 2024

Published: 18 November 2024



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in 2011 and she realised that she was—unlike how she had generally experienced being Catholic in Japan—not alone as a believer: “My faith was lit up at World Youth Day, I was surprised about how many Christians there were and moved by the thought that there were actually so many Christians all over the world”. Attending World Youth Day sparked a spiritual high for Saori: seeing such sheer numbers of Catholics—compared to the relatively low numbers she had encountered in Japan—she forgot her sense of alienation as a Catholic in Japan. Yet, as quickly as the chart rose, it took a sharp dive again: “But when I went home to Japan and went to places with other Christians, like Emao or something, my theology department, I was shocked at the contrast and realized how truly small our community is”. After that, Saori’s faith sunk dramatically downwards—it was thereafter at an even lower point than with the incident with the classmate.

Saori’s story of how her faith rose, fell, rose, and fell again was a typical one; over the course of our fieldwork, multiple other interlocutors told similar stories. At another meeting, one interlocutor mentioned that he too, as a Catholic from childhood, had felt his faith diminish quite a bit in elementary school—to the agreement of the others present, with *kimochi ga wakaru!* (I get that!) comments galore.

Lapsing in this way—that is, for one’s faith to decline or even disappear, however temporarily—is something of a peculiarly Catholic phenomenon (c.f. [Mayblin 2017](#)). The figure of the ‘lapsed Catholic’ is a common one—someone who is Catholic despite not actively practicing or believing. Even throughout all these ups and downs, Saori and other interlocutors always considered themselves—and were considered by fellow Catholics—to have remained Catholic, despite having ‘lapsed’ in their faith repeatedly. As Maya Mayblin has pointed out, “non-believing, religiously indifferent, and ritually disengaged Catholics retain their Catholicism, becoming *lapsed Catholics*, whereas non-believing and religiously indifferent Protestants tend simply to cease being Christian altogether” ([Mayblin 2017](#), pp. 504–5). The anthropology of Christianity, for instance, has been strongly influenced by an emphasis on discontinuity and rupture, stemming from anthropological attention disproportionately focusing on evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal Protestant churches where such narratives are common and foundational to how adherents understand their faiths (e.g., [Bialecki et al. 2008](#); [Robbins 2007](#); [Meyer 1998](#)). Within such churches generally, to be Christian is made up first and foremost of fervent and ongoing active belief—belief that rejects everything that lies outside it. As such, for many Pentecostal churches, irregular attenders of services are not even counted as members, as they “are by their definition not only attenders but militants. Therefore, for fervent Pentecostals, nonattenders are nonmembers” ([Cleary 1998](#), p. 7). Those whose faith lapses are erased from church memory and history because “as Pentecostals see the situation, these are people who have tasted the best and highest but are now content to feed on crumbs” ([Hollenweger 1997](#), p. 390). It is not possible under such a framework to lapse like our interlocutors did.

As [Norget et al. \(2017\)](#) have pointed out, “the nature of ‘rupture’ [has flourished] within the discipline, attention to rupture’s conceptual counterpart, ‘continuity’ or ‘endurance,’ has been slower to emerge. For the anthropology of Catholicism this remains a problem, for continuity emerges time and again as an ethnographic concept in its own terms such as in the guise of ‘tradition’—a value that derives partly from the theological principle of apostolic succession” ([Norget et al. 2017](#), p. 5). [Mayblin \(2017\)](#) argues that Catholics around the world tend to see themselves as part of a long line of continuity stretching back in time, not just in the Church’s history but also in their own personal histories, connecting to their Catholic parents, relatives, and ancestors ([Mayblin 2017](#)). As Saori’s story illustrates, she connects her Catholic faith back through time to her own childhood and to her Catholic upbringing and her Catholic grandparents. Despite her lapses in faith, her Catholic identity was a continuous—albeit sometimes turbulent—one, rather than one marked by clear breaks and ruptures.

Yet, even so, lapsing has been and continues to be a major point of concern for the Catholic Church. Today, the fact that our interlocutors’ belief lapsed and relapsed—even

just within the span of their lives to date—is a worry for the modern Church as many Catholics worldwide leave the religion for another denomination, another faith, or none at all (Pew Research Center 2013). In this, then—and as is visible in Saori’s narrative, one which is representative of many we recorded over the course of fieldwork—the continuity that Mayblin identifies as central to being Catholic is not static or effortless. Furthermore, as this article shows, it is not just temporal but also geographic. The unity of the Catholic Church is meant to be global; unlike evangelical Protestant churches, where new independent churches can spring up overnight, the Catholic Church is meant to be a unified global institution with a unified hierarchy led by the Pope.

This article seeks to bring to bear the ‘translocality’ of Catholicism on understanding lapsing as a phenomenon among young Japanese Catholics. In speaking of translocality, we build on Napolitano and Norget’s (2011) exhortation to move discussions of Catholicism away from the nation-state as the default unit for understanding the relationship between the global and the local; as they point out, the Roman Catholic Church predates the formation of many nations themselves. Instead, they stress that the “flows of power, authority, and meaning” circulate among Catholic communities within, across, and among particular ‘locales’ in ways that are not constrained by a nation-state’s borders or jurisdiction. As we discuss, our interlocutors understood their Catholicism in relation to their locale, as well as in terms of the Catholic Church as a translocal community and institution; Saori’s faith—and lapses thereof—were strongly influenced by the discrepancy she felt between being a believing Catholic in Japan, and being a believing Catholic outside of Japan. As Napolitano and Norget argue, “translocal Catholic flows of symbols, images, ideas, people, and power constitute trans-border communities structured by forces other than—but not outside of—the social, political, and economic exigencies of bounded nation-states. Secular and sacred power are not mutually exclusive, but neither can their respective workings or guiding normative logics be reduced to one another” (Napolitano and Norget 2011, p. 252). In particular, we view translocality as it impacts our interlocutors through the lens of the New Evangelisation, a church-wide movement that focuses on the revitalisation of the global Catholic Church as numbers of believers dwindle locally in historically Catholic countries. The New Evangelisation has sought to address this by foregrounding active belief as the uniting common foundation of Catholic religiosity—something which, as we will argue, helped our interlocutors connect their Catholic identity with the global Church, contributing to rises in faith, but which has simultaneously helped to alienate them from fellow Japanese, contributing to lapses in faith.

This paper draws on fieldwork carried out between 2017 and 2019 with Japanese Catholic students at Sophia University [*Jōchi Daigaku*], the first Catholic university in Japan. Sophia University (often shortened to just “Sophia” or “*Jōchi*”) was established in 1913 by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). It is in the Yotsuya neighbourhood of Tokyo, and next door to it is St. Ignatius Catholic Church, the largest Catholic parish in Japan by number of parishioners. Both Sophia and the St. Ignatius parish have been influential in twentieth-century Japanese Catholicism and Asian Catholicism more generally, having an impressive list of Japanese Catholic alumni, including a previous Archbishop of Tokyo (1970–2000), Peter Shirayanagi, and being a major networking centre, and seminary of Roman Catholicism in the Asia-Pacific region.

We focus in this study on younger Catholics, such as those like Sophia—in Japan, undergraduate and postgraduate students are generally between the ages of 18 and 24—in order to lessen focus on the major life events such as death or severe illness that often act as a trigger for lapsing among older Christians.¹ Additionally, this age range is one that has only substantially known a post-New Evangelisation Catholic Church—a hugely crucial factor in the shape of Japanese Catholicism today. Apart from a few, our interlocutors were from a Catholic upbringing and went to Catholic schools through to their undergraduate degree.² Their families were all broadly middle class, which is reflected in our interlocutors’ ability to attend the private university of Sophia, along with their capacity for international mobility, which concerns us in the rest of the paper. While just over half were from Tokyo,

the rest of the students were from different prefectures across Japan, including Fukuoka, Nagasaki, Miyagi, Saitama, and Kyoto. All names are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been anonymised.

2. Catholicism and/in Japan: Faith Falling

Catholicism has a long history in Japan, reaching back nearly five centuries. St. Francis Xavier arrived and began evangelisation in 1549, which was successful for a time. Christianity spread rapidly for about a century, until it was first prohibited and then violently suppressed as a foreign ideological and political movement when Japan became an isolationist country, something which only lessened during the early years of the Meiji Restoration (Josephson-Storm 2012). By the early 20th century, however, Christianity was still regarded with ambivalence, with certain Japanese Christian advocates such as Uchimura Kanzō actively promoting Christian humanist or pacifist ideas as a counter to the growing militarism of Imperial Japan (Mullins 1994). As of 2019, there were only 536,000 Catholics in Japan, comprising less than 1% of the population.³ As we repeatedly heard from our interlocutors, young Japanese Catholics know that they are—purely by virtue of being Catholic—part of a very small minority in Japan. A recurring factor in our interlocutor’s ‘lapses’ was a pervasive sense of alienation from their non-Catholic Japanese peers due to their faith, often starting—as the opening anecdote attests—at a young age. Another Catholic student, Minori, shared with us that the zenith of her faith was “when I was a child, [when] I was a diligent believer [*shinja*]...I went to Mass every Sunday, I prayed really hard, and really believed in Jesus. [...] [But] then I went to elementary school and talked to other kids there. That’s when I learned that there are non-Catholic people too. I started questioning everything: why am I Catholic? is Jesus real? who is He? and stuff like that”. That, she indicated, was when she no longer believed at all.

Earlier Japanese Christians often cast the difference they felt between what it means to be Japanese and what it means to be Christian in terms of a fundamental split between “West” and “East” poles that resulted in a necessarily “ambivalent” identity for Japanese Christians. In an attempt to resolve this uncomfortable state, Uchimura Kanzō, for instance, sought to arbitrarily “purify” Christianity from what he identified as Western cultural elements. Instead, he emphasised how Japan, too, was part of “God’s nation” through his *mukyōkai* “Non-Church” movement (Uchimura 1895, p. 147). The Japanese Catholic writer Endō Shūsaku expressed in his famed novel *Silence* a love for Catholicism and yet at the same time a deep pessimism about how it could survive in the all-eroding “swamp” of Japan (Endō 1980, p. 151; see also Williams 2011). Endō argued that this “mud swamp” had prevented Japan from accepting Catholicism fully in the 17th century, and if the religion “had been less incorrigibly Western, things might have been different” (1980, p. xx). He saw Catholicism as the “true religion” and described it as a “symphony” in which all nations have a part to play, but desired to find out “what exactly this part” is for Japan (1980, p. xxi). For these earlier Japanese Christians, to be Japanese or to be Catholic was mapped onto a dichotomy that opposed East and West as given and mutually exclusive categories.

Although this East versus West distinction was no longer at the forefront of how our interlocutors perceived the root of their feelings of alienation—and, indeed, Doak (2011, 2019) argues that Endō’s contrast between a “Western” Catholicism and “Eastern” Japan was simply a minority opinion—our interlocutors still contrasted themselves as Japanese Catholics against both non-Japanese Catholics and non-Christian Japanese. In particular, they drew comparisons between ‘local’ (Japanese) versus ‘translocal’ Catholic religious commitment and belief, especially centring on the perceived difference between Catholic and Japanese religiosities.

Mainstream Japanese religiosity has tended to emphasise ritual practice over belief as the main driver of membership (Reader 1991). Nationally, over 90% of the Japanese population consider themselves Shinto or Buddhist (Iwasa 2024), with many participating in religious activities like pilgrimage in ways that do not fit an explicitly ‘pure’ religious form (Reader and Walter 1993). Ama (2005, p. 3) argues that Japanese religious practice is a

form of “natural religion” distinct from “revealed religion” like those of the Abrahamic traditions. In this, ‘natural religion’ is less about institutionalised traditions and more about an affective impulse to perform certain rituals, venerate particular places or objects, and have an ambiguous sense of the ‘sacred’ (cf. [Schaefer 2015](#)). In this sense, the main form of religiosity in Japan is comprised of ritual performance and not necessarily—in fact rarely—sincere adherence to a set of doctrine, code of conduct, or body of texts.

This form of religiosity, however, was dismissed by our interlocutors as not ‘really’ religion. In one conversation with Emi, an undergraduate student studying theology, she argued that,

For me going to a shrine does not count as praying [*inori*]—it’s just wishing [*onegai*]. Praying means reflecting upon oneself and finding one’s connection with God [*jibun no koto wo mitsume naoshitari jibun to kamisama kankei wo mitsumetari suru*] but for those who go to a shrine, it isn’t praying but making wishes: wishing for one’s health to recover, or getting a perfect score on a test, which is why I think it’s counts as wishing and not as prayer.

Instead, our interlocutors understood religiosity as rooted first and foremost in active belief. Saori, differentiating herself from her non-Catholic Japanese peers, emphasised that she was a committed Catholic in both her belief and practice: “I was a diligent believer [*shinja*], I went to Mass every Sunday, I prayed really hard, and really believed in Jesus. But the other Japanese do not believe in anything, even if they go to a Shinto shrine on New Years Day⁴”.

Emi and Saori’s insistence on active belief over ritual participation—which was common across our interlocutors—stands in contrast to recent anthropological analyses of Catholicism, which have tended to foreground the importance of images (e.g., [Hoenes Del Pinal et al. 2019](#)) and indeed actively sought to move away from intensively managed inner belief as the determining feature of Catholic religiosity. This has followed on from [Ruel’s \(1982\)](#) and [Pouillon’s \(1982\)](#) famous critiques of anthropological assumptions that belief was necessarily the central defining feature of what it means to be a member of a religion—in particular, that belief in this sense bundled three facets (faith in God’s existence; confidence in God; and acceptance of the truth claim of Christian doctrine) into one and is a historically specific phenomenon. As [Smith \(1962, p. 71\)](#) argues, the idea of ‘Christianity’ as made up of a system of beliefs is a legacy of the European Enlightenment. The focus on interiority was a part of wider “contemporary European debates over exterior versus interior forms of worship, in which many theologians viewed interior sentiment and consent to God as more worth than exterior acts of devotion” ([Hyland 2003, p. 11](#)). It is with this in mind that [Asad](#) contends that [Geertz’s \(1973\)](#) definition of religion (and the central position of belief within it) is a “modern, privatised Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasises the priority of belief as a state of mind” (1983, p. 247). For [Asad](#), belief was—before the Reformation and before the Enlightenment—instead “embodied in practice and discourse” ([Asad 1983, p. 248](#)). Anthropologists have since built on this ethnographically: [Mitchell and Mitchell’s](#) study of Maltese Catholics, for instance, seeks to reframe Catholic belief as one of habitus. They argue that belief should be seen as a “process through which primarily non-linguistic knowledge is produced and reproduced to generate a distinctive orientation to the world” ([Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 81](#)).

As such, our interlocutors run counter to this push to differentiate Catholic religiosity and ‘belief’ from the evangelical Protestant understanding of belief. Instead, their stances more closely match what anthropologists have described from Protestant Christians who have been sceptical of the sincerity of ritual practice with the rationale that it was indistinguishable from “tradition” at best, and reflected an ignorance of “sincere religiosity” at worst ([Asad 1993; Keane 2007](#)). [Suma Ikeuchi \(2017\)](#) has illustrated, for instance, how Japanese Brazilian Pentecostals in Japan see the average Japanese (and Catholics in general, for that matter) as non-religious because of an emphasis on ritual adherence over interior belief. Such Pentecostals deem their counterparts “non-religious” (*mushūkyō*) because the non-religious do not sincerely believe in the rituals that they perform or the doc-

trines of which their religions teach. Her self-identified non-religious interlocutors—like ours—think of themselves as not holding any sort of belief in the various Buddhist and Shinto rituals they might participate in throughout the year (2017, pp. 11–13).

Nevertheless, our interlocutors were not Pentecostals. Instead, this emphasis on belief among our interlocutors is more directly descended from the ‘New Evangelisation’, a movement with roots in the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and popularized during the papacy of St. John Paul II (1978–2005). Much anthropological attention towards the New Evangelisation has attended to the proliferation of Catholic media and aesthetics (e.g., Cant 2024; Loustau 2019), but we emphasise here what Peterson and Vasquez (1998) have highlighted: that a key goal of the New Evangelisation has been achieving doctrinal uniformity and homogeneity, making being Catholic necessarily linked to holding the “correct” or orthodox beliefs. It is this New Evangelisation that has strongly shaped contemporary Japanese Catholicism, and it is such a ‘New Evangelisation’ Church that our interlocutors grew up and learned how to be Catholic in.

This New Evangelisation focus on belief is what underlaid our interlocutors’ dismissal of Japanese religiosity as not ‘real’ religion and it is also what generated the active belief-focused religiosity that was often construed as suspicious, even alarming, by other Japanese. This was a dynamic that had escalated particularly in the wake of the Aum incident in March 1995—where the religious group Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas within the Tokyo subway system, killing 13 people and injuring at least 6000 people—with ‘religion’ becoming a source of moral panic (Reader 2001) and resulting in an overhaul in religion as a legal category (Lobreglio 1997). Scholars have documented how since 1995, the Japanese public at large has often seen religion as a source of irrationality at best and violence at worst (Baffelli and Reader 2012, pp. 7–16). Even before Aum, the mainstream public was already sceptical of religion for being “outdated” and superstitious, in the historical light of the coercive militarism of State Shinto and certain religious organisational scams selling magical items and services (Reader 2012). Japanese public discourse worried that religious groups left unchecked could potentially become like Aum, and therefore the government and private corporations should regulate religion more to protect the public from it (Baffelli and Reader 2012; Reader 2001).

Our interlocutors experienced this antipathy as part of a climate of fear of religion. In another conversation, Saori spoke about how her non-Catholic peers were often taken aback, even fearful, when she talked about her faith:

S: I am a Japanese Christian so talking about religion or saying God is natural [*nachuraru*] but for others, Japanese who are not religious at all, when asked, they’ll...say things like “that’s scary [*kowai*]”, or “is that okay? [*daijōbu?*]” or “I don’t believe that stuff [*shinjite nai*]”.

Saori interpreted this as part of a wider mainstream Japanese cultural line of thinking which links religion and violence:

S: My friends throughout middle and high school and my non-believer friends, when they hear religion, their first reaction is that it’s “scary”. That’s due to Aum Shinrikyo and those kinds of cults [*karuto*], which there are a lot on Japanese news. Also, during Christmas time there are signs along roads that say, “you’re going to hell!” and all. There aren’t many chances to explain. So first we have to bring a positive image of religion. Then to Christianity, then from Christianity Catholicism, and unless we go with that sort of flow there will be bad misunderstandings born [*sugoku gokai ga umarete shimau*].

A: What’s scary about religion?

S: Religion? Hmm, first from the point of non-believers believing in invisible things like “God” is incomprehensible. I also think Aum Shinrikyo had a strong influence. And I think Islam, or the sources of war, has a negative image, in Japan. On the contrary, there are those who know of volunteers or Mother Theresa, that there are good religious people too. They are more like “I know and acknowl-

edge that you are a believer, but I will not join you". It's like that, like a line has been drawn [*sen wo hiiteiru kanji wa aru*].

In response, our interlocutors often deliberately hid their faith from new Japanese acquaintances. One day at lunch with Emi, a friend of one of the co-authors happened upon our lunch and came over to say hello. Upon introductions, the friend was excited to learn that Emi was Japanese too, and asked Emi how we had met. At this, Emi looked briefly panicked, and after a couple of seconds of silence, one of the co-authors stepped in and said that we had met at a Catholic group on campus. The friend glowed with interest and asked if Emi was Catholic, to which Emi timidly replied, "Yes". Emi was then asked what she was studying and took another pause before she cautiously answered, "theology [*shingaku*]", which only delighted this friend further—much to Emi's bewilderment. Afterwards—given the apparent awkwardness of the exchange—we asked Emi if it had been too far to disclose her religious affiliation. Emi said that it was alright, but that she tends to be picky about who she shares this information with. She explained that when she first told her friends that she planned to study theology at university, they were alarmed and surprised that she had any interest in religion.

E: In general Japanese people think religion is a bit scary [*chotto kowai*]. When I tell my friends I'm a theology student they are like "what?! Religion?!" I tell them "it's not a dangerous religion! [*abunai shūkyō de wa nai yo!*]" because I'm Catholic. They say "oh, so you pray?" or "you believe in God?" and they often have a look of doubt or fear in their eyes [*sugoi utagai toka chotto kowai me de mirareru koto ga ooi*]. Therefore religion doesn't really have a good image to the Japanese people. It's because there was Aum Shinrikyo and there were many incidents with them so since then religion's image has diminished. I think the image has worsened. In relation to Catholicism, smart Japanese people know what it is so they understand what I mean when I tell them. But my friends don't know. They ask "what's Catholicism?" and don't even know what Protestantism is so they are like "is that Christianity?" There aren't many people who know in the first place; people around me don't really know.

This extended even to those close to her—Emi's own family had been sceptical when they first learned that she wanted to formally convert to Catholicism. Despite having enrolled her in Catholic schools since birth, they thought she would be joining a "cult" [*karuto*]. She responded: "I already believed [*shinjite ita*] in the Catholic faith, and I wanted to become Catholic even if it was just me [*watashi dake demo katorikku ni naritai*]" (She was permitted to get baptized once she turned twenty, the legal age of adulthood in Japan.)

Japan's relationship with Catholicism is a longstanding but often ambivalent one—and this was felt not just at the structural but also at a personal level for our interlocutors. The young Japanese Catholics we spoke to perceived and experienced mainstream Japanese society as at best confused about and at worst actively hostile to their faith. This has been further cemented by the New Evangelisation's emphasis on active belief as the ideal way to be Catholic—a stance that is relatively recent and that stands in contrast to existing anthropological discourses about Catholic religiosity. Our interlocutors, however, have never known a pre-Vatican II or indeed a pre-New Evangelisation Catholic Church; for them, proper Catholic religiosity was necessarily one focused on active belief and faith commitment. This meant that they dismissed Japanese religiosity as not 'real' religion at the same time that they were aware that their belief-focused form of religiosity is one regarded as inherently suspicious in Japan. In consequence, our interlocutors often took pains to hide their faith not just in public, but even in private from close friends and family—contributing to their feelings of alienation and the resulting decline and 'lapse' in their faith.

3. Catholicism and Translocalism: Faith Rising

When Yurika reflected on her experiences as a Catholic abroad, she paid especial attention to the connections she had been able to make with Catholics from countries outside of Japan:

Y: I've been on pilgrimage [*junrei*] three times. The first was Korea for Asian Youth Day (AYD)⁵ as a freshman in the summer of 2014 for 10 days. Second time was last summer when I went to Korea for a pilgrimage week [*junrei shūkan*] that the Diocese of Seoul invited us to, and over there were many young Asians [*ajia no seinen*]. While Asian Youth Day was large scale [*dai kibo*] this time's Korean pilgrimage was by invitation so only two people from each country could go and there were only six countries invited. It was a small pilgrimage group. Five days. The third time was this March (2019) when I went to France for two weeks and it was mostly theology students; about twenty people went.

A: Did you mingle [*kōryū*] with any of the local Catholics during that experience?

Y: Yeah, the whole thing was mingling. It was mainly sharing (*wakachiai*), or eating together, or going to Mass.

A: How was it?

Y: The environment was different, but through the same [*onaji*] faith, the Mass, as Christians, no matter the country the Mass is the same, and I was incredibly happy to go to Mass with people I would never meet otherwise. Thinking about it, I was extremely happy then.

Rather than hiding her beliefs as her friends had done and as she had done in Japan, Yurika openly went to Mass abroad and ate with and spoke about her faith with strangers—something that made her 'extremely happy', and these experiences generally renewed her faith for a time.

Coupled with the New Evangelisation's revived focus on active belief is the drive to renew an ageing and lapsing Church by revitalising it with believers from the historical peripheries of the Catholic Church: Latin America (e.g., [Napolitano 2016](#)), Africa (e.g., [Ogbonnaya 2015](#)), and Asia (e.g., [Brown 2020](#); [Ngo 2015](#)). Since the start of the New Evangelization, the Catholic Church has made several attempts to reincorporate Japan—as it is considered a peripheral part of the Church—through various means, including the incorporation of local aesthetics, symbols, and devotional figures (e.g., [Norget 2011](#); [Omata Rappo 2021](#)). This includes the two papal visits to Japan, first in 1981 by Pope John Paul II and then in 2018 by Pope Francis. Both visited the two atomic bombing sites of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, as well as Sophia University in Tokyo. It was a route that was not centred on a particular shrine, but instead an aspired-to Catholic geography: where the Church was, is, and should be, circulated by the presence of the Pope himself ([Norman and Johnson 2011](#); [Niedzwiedz 2019](#)), aiming to reinvigorate Catholic life there. This rejuvenation has been especially aimed at young Catholics. In 1985, Pope John Paul II initiated a new, worldwide Catholic "pilgrimage event" called World Youth Day (WYD) that would move every two to four years among the Americas, Europe, and Asia/Pacific regions.

These events are a key part of how the Catholic Church manifests itself as a 'translocal institution' in the sense [Napolitano and Norget \(2011\)](#) lay out, especially for Catholics from the 'periphery'. They were enormously influential for our interlocutors—as young Catholics from the 'periphery', they were very much the intended targets of these efforts. As [Norman and Johnson \(2011\)](#) argue, WYD is a product of the New Evangelization and its push to re-evangelize an increasingly 'secular' (meaning non- or anti-Christian) world. WYD events aim to stimulate and refine a sense of translocal Catholicism as they attract Catholic youth from all over the world to participate in liturgical events, talks, cultural exchanges in the hosting country, and audiences with the Pope. As such, translocalism is integral to the goals of the New Evangelisation. It acts as a key "institutional Church project of conjuring and inculcating in worshippers a deeply felt, embodied sense of belonging and allegiance to a larger, global Catholic community and project" ([Napolitano](#)

and Norget 2011, p. 253)—as we saw for both Saori and Yurika. Indeed, the influence of the New Evangelisation via WYD is explicit for our interlocutors, where Emao itself was formed as the result of a WYD. The 1997 WYD had been in Paris, and Professor Nakajima saw this as a good opportunity to take a handful of theology students with her to expose them to the rest of the Catholic world. She told us that those who went with her were very fired up (*moete iru*) from the event and wanted to share and discuss their emotions with other students—and from this zeal, Emao was created.

Translocality thus helps to construct the Catholic Church as a morally and geographically transcendent authority that unites the enormously diverse global Catholic population. As Badone (2014) details, pilgrimages—such as WYD—act to cultivate a consciousness among Catholics of Catholic translocality as embodied via movement across different sites within the Catholic world. Translocalism is not merely a one-off event, but something increasingly inculcated and embedded in modern Catholic practice and self-conception as part of the New Evangelisation. In particular, it is supported by a shared hermeneutic of semiotics regulated by Catholic Church authority, which then helps to index shared doctrinal beliefs. With the majority of Catholics now existing outside of the “West” (Cabrita et al. 2017), and historically Catholic countries such as Spain increasingly rejecting the influence of the Church (Roy 2020), translocality conceptualises that diversity as a natural characteristic of a non-geographic Church—thus, also eliding the highly varied experiences of Catholicism by focusing on belief as a universal and unifying quality.

Such was the case for Miyuki, the undergraduate who led Emao the night of the faith graph activity when she went on a family vacation to the predominately Catholic East Timor:

M: I went to church in East Timor and thought it was surprisingly youthful. The opposite of here [Japan], there were children, people around my age, and it was amazing. Since it was Sunday, about 100 people were fervently [*nesshin ni*] gathered at the church door and the church scene was completely different than Japan’s. If you go to Mass in Japan you get a ton of old men and women. That’s something completely different with East Timor, the liveliness. There were also a lot of babies and young children wearing rosaries around their necks. I was surprised by their self-confident expression.

A: Do you feel as though the Catholic Church in East Timor and Japan are different? M: Maybe only on the surface [*hyōmen teki ni*]. But the Mass was the same [*onaji*]. The homilies were short so I thought “yeah that’s pretty Catholic” *haha*. Also I thought it was pretty Catholic that we spoke a lot about Mary. The faith is the same [*shinkō ga onaji*].

A: Faith?

M: The same “Jesus Christ”, and the tradition [*denshō*] is similar. People worship the God of the Trinity and so do I. So even if we don’t understand the language, I think we’re together [*issho*]. Also, we similarly value Mary, like, you know about calling on the intercession of Mary, Undoer of Knots? Even there they value her so I thought “I’m the same with this person” and felt the connection that way, although we didn’t talk *haha*.

Like Yurika, Miyuki felt a translocal connection with Catholics outside of Japan, but unlike Yurika, Miyuki’s sense of connection came not through conversation but through the shared hermeneutic similarities of the Mass, the rosaries, Mary Undoer of Knots, and even the characteristically short homilies, all of which contributed to her feeling of recognition and shared religious identity. Such Marian devotions—another central driving focal point of the New Evangelisation as part of building a doctrinal and devotional uniformity among devotees (Napolitano 2016, pp. 127–28)—are particularly effective in promoting translocality because they ‘contain or exceed the affect of the nation’ (2016, p. 127), meaning they are symbolically, affectively, and politically polyvalent and are not limited to singular agendas, such as nationalism.

For our interlocutors, translocal events such as WYD and AYD and other experiences of translocal Catholicism helped to take them out of the sense of alienation they felt as Japanese Catholics in Japan. Their Catholic identities were no longer limited by their local Japanese social context but instead extended beyond their national-religious identity by virtue of a shared commitment to visible and active belief. These experiences of the translocal Catholic Church were important factors in rises in faith in our interlocutors, encouraged by a sense of global Catholic identity and unity—precisely the goals of translocalism and the foregrounding of active belief as part of the new Evangelisation. While their faith fell because of a sense of isolation and alienation in Japan, it rose again when they felt their Catholic identity and belief-driven religiosity as a uniting rather than dividing factor outside of Japan.

4. Returning to Japan: Faith Falls Again

WYD and AYD have similar ritual goals—to renew an evangelistic spirit in participants so that they may counter the lapsing of Catholics in historically Catholic countries (Peterson and Vasquez 1998). Even Miyuki’s family holiday—which was not explicitly a pilgrimage—managed to spark such a reaction in her. However, this effect was transient: cultivating translocality does not always guarantee a revitalisation of the faith in the local.

As the previous section showed, the translocality that our interlocutors accessed is one grounded in a belief-forward understanding of religion. This focus on belief is not necessarily given, but is rather the historically specific product of longstanding push-and-pull dynamics within the Catholic Church at large. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which enacted reforms to modernise the Church, Japanese bishops sought to start various theological projects of inculturation in attempts to make Catholicism “more Japanese” and “less Western”. On multiple occasions, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan has critically responded to synod questionnaires in regards to issues about Asian Catholicism in 1997 and later in 2014 on issues of “the family”. In both instances, they criticized the Vatican as being “too Eurocentric” in their theological approach and questions and argued that the Holy See needed to listen to them (the Japanese) for once. Conservative theologians of the Catholic Church, such as the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), pushed back by arguing for the universality of the Catholic Church and the truth it purports and criticised in turn what they thought were uncritically ethnocentric stances by the Japanese bishops (c.f. Doak 2011).

The Catholicism that our interlocutors had learned to practice tended towards the latter, focusing—as we have shown—on the universality of the truth of Catholic doctrine and belief. For example, Sophia’s chaplain, Father (Fr.) José, was from Argentina, and in one notable talk for Emao on the Tuesday after Pentecost (a feast day), he spoke—in Japanese—about the story of the Tower of Babel, a tale in the Old Testament that mythically explained the existence of multiple languages because of humanity’s desire to build a tower that could reach Heaven. In the story, the tower-building people spoke a singular language, but their hubris angered God enough to scramble their tongues into different languages, making cooperation and work on the tower impossible. Fr. José saw the Pentecost as a reversal of the Tower of Babel, an event that made possible the preaching of the Gospel to people in all languages through the gift of tongues and missionary zeal. “Through the Holy Spirit”, he emphasized, “we are all able to share the same faith, and that the faith is something that can be and should be shared”.

This ‘same faith’ was something that our interlocutors felt strongly about; outside of Japan, these shared beliefs and apparent unity with Catholics in other countries energised them and prompted pride in their own Catholicism. However, our interlocutors all, sooner or later, returned home to Japan. When they did, they often made a point of noting that the sense of unity they had so enjoyed abroad was something that was largely missing from Japan and Japanese Catholic communities. Yurika, for instance, compared France, Korea, and Japan:

Y: I thought Korea and France were the same (*onaji*) but, Korea had a strong momentum (*ikioi ga tsuyoi*), while France is originally a Catholic country. While the number of believers are reducing (*hetteiru*), it was originally a Catholic country so whenever you enter a church, go to Mass, or say “I’m a believer” (*watashi ga shinja desu*) there is no sense of being a minority. On that point, I like France and Korea. I felt that the strongest. In Japan, no matter where you go, no matter which church you go to, you go as a minority and I can’t remove (*nukenai*) that feeling. But there was none of that when I went to Korea or France. I didn’t feel [like a minority] and maybe instead I felt some pride in my Catholicism. I must have thought that first when I went to Korea. At first I thought it was just me who didn’t have pride in their faith, but the first time I went to Korea I saw how lively (*mori agatteiru*) the Korean Church was and began to think maybe the lack of pride is a problem of the whole Catholic Church in Japan.

Yukiko was aware of and contextualised her experience as a religious minority within national categories. Her Catholicism in Japan was associated with being a minority who can only believe appropriately in reserved privacy. In contrast, being an actively believing Catholic in Korea or France, irrespective of how local Catholics may feel about their faith there, gave Yukiko a sense of pride. Her Korean pilgrimage prompted her to see a ‘lack of pride’ as endemic to the whole Japanese Church and thus makes the sensation of lapsing to be a problem specific to being Catholic in Japan.

Similarly, at one point, we followed up with Saori personally to ask more about her experience with WYD. She had an almost existential reflection about what it meant for her to be a Japanese Catholic in light of what it meant to be Catholic elsewhere:

S: After a workshop [in Madrid], at the place to share with each other, the group of girls [I was with] without hesitation talked about their faith, and their expenses, like in Germany for example, could be covered with stable [*antei*] Christian-related jobs. I also didn’t really feel the same kind of unease [*fuan*] [I had] while talking. But for Japan, if we don’t think about “What even is a Christian?” while living ordinary life [*atari mae no seikatsu*] then we will be made to forget our faithfulness. That’s pretty common. I feel that is the foremost difficulty of the Japanese.

A: What do you mean by “ordinary life?”

S: Just regular living [*futsū no seikatsu*], like going to school or getting a job. I believe in Christianity but because I know ‘you’ [other Japanese people] don’t believe I can’t really talk about the faith strongly, so even if I believe, I can’t say anything. And then, looking at my friends, since there are few people I can share the faith with, I am uneasy [*fuan*] about if it’s okay to be so confident. There are the difficulties of ‘how should I pray?’ or studying Christianity and wanting to have a job related to it but not having many options.

Like Yukiko, Saori framed her lapsing within the language of nation-states. Her time in Madrid briefly suspended her private, Japanese faith and placed her in communion and a unity of belief with Catholics from all over, in this instance Germany. But when she returned to Japan, her problems reemerged, and she reflected on her faith problems, including feelings of unease and a fundamental mismatch between her desire to practice Catholic religiosity via active belief and how Japanese people around her construed such active belief.

Ironically, then, it is the same belief-focused approach that formed the basis of the translocal connections that then proved to be a problem when they returned to Japan and mainstream Japanese society. Both Yukiko’s and Saori’s faiths lapsed after the invigoration they felt abroad. While WYD and AYD were successful in inspiring our interlocutors, the ‘spiritual high’ they felt could not be sustained when they returned to Japan, and their sense of Japan as a locality (and the accompanying alienation) was restored. These dynamics of faith point to an ironic consequence of the New Evangelisation in Japan—in promoting belief, it joins our interlocutors with the translocality of the global Church; at the same

time, it also helps to alienate them from mainstream Japanese society, contributing to their repeated lapsing.

5. Conclusions

Throughout these lapses and relapses in faith, our interlocutors continued to consider themselves Catholic by identity. Despite this continuity, however, the ups and downs were considerable and notable—never constituting quite a rupture, but still indicative of how the continuity that scholars (e.g., Norget et al. 2017; Mayblin 2017) have noted as a feature of Catholicism is in reality often a turbulent one. This turbulence is one that concerns the Catholic Church today and which the New Evangelisation has sought to address in significant part by foregrounding belief as the common foundation of Catholics around the world.

Norget et al. argue that such institutional Catholic attempts to reabsorb the ‘periphery’ act as a form of “beneficent cannibalisation” (2017, p. 16) where “all elements of indigeneity became ‘scripted’ until the final celebration was one in which ‘the Otherness of that culture had been thoroughly tamed’” (2017, p. 16)—resulting in “distanced and disembedded Otherness [submitting] to the church as ‘author of a univocal enunciation of indigenosity’” (2017, p. 16). In other words, through the incorporation of historically ‘peripheral’ areas (such as Japan) and demographics (the youth), the New Evangelisation acts—through programmes such as Youth Days—to centralise and, to some degree, homogenise and thereby unify what is an enormously broad and diverse global Church.

As our interlocutors show, such movements can be a double-edged sword. The active belief-focused religiosity promulgated by the New Evangelisation allowed our Japanese Catholic interlocutors—who are too young to have experienced the Church any other way—to connect and form a sense of Catholic identity through translocality and to draw on shared beliefs and hermeneutics to participate in a global Catholic faith. At the same time, it is this active, belief-focused religiosity that alienates them from mainstream Japanese society—and, in doing so, precipitates lapsing.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.F.N.; investigation, H.F.N.; writing—original draft preparation, H.F.N.; writing—review and editing, C.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Global Studies, Sophia University on 15 September 2017.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to privacy and ethical concerns.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ e.g., <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/readers-write/lapse-essays-readers> (accessed on 1 October 2024).
- ² It is not uncommon for Japanese parents to enrol their children in religious schools because there is no expectation of conversion. Most students at Sophia University consider themselves to be areligious.
- ³ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-11/omi-missionaries-japan-rozairo-mission-to-migrants.html> visited 8 July 2024.
- ⁴ Saori is referencing the common practice of *hatsumōde*, the year’s first visit to a Shinto shrine where visitors make a small financial offering while ritually clapping their hands and “praying” or making a wish.
- ⁵ Asian Youth Day is structurally similar to WYD, but geographically centred in Asia.

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