

KANZO UCHIMURA

— Founder of the Non-Church Movement —

Condensed by the editor from
an unpublished manuscript by
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I

FIRST CONTACT WITH CHRISTIANITY

Kanzō Uchimura was born in Yedo, as Tokyo was then called, on March 23, 1861, the oldest child of a samurai and minor official of the Takasaki feudal clan. His first contact with Christianity was an invitation by a schoolmate “to a certain place in foreigners’ quarter, where we can hear pretty women sing, and a tall big man with long beard shout and howl upon an elevated place, flinging his arms and twisting his body in all fantastic manners, to all which admittance is entirely free.” He received here his first lessons in English, a language which he mastered so well later that he used it to write hundreds of letters to his inner circle of friends, but the Christianity did not “take,” “though its music, its stories and the kindness shown me by its followers pleased me immensely.” Thus his first impression, a very casual one, was favourable.

We know little of his early formal education. He attended private and government schools in Tokyo and Takasaki, the clan headquarters, where the family lived for a few years during Kanzo’s boyhood.²

II

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY AT SAPPORO

At the age of sixteen he was sent to Sapporo Agricultural College in the capital of the large northern island of Hokkaido where, though a Japanese was the principal of the college, Dr. William S. Clark, president of Massachusetts Agricultural College, as vice principal, was given a free hand in running the school.

Clark was a man of character as well as a good educator and evangelist, for he prepared a "Covenant of Believers in Jesus" which he persuaded all the members of his class to sign. This document begins with the preamble, "The undersigned members of Sapporo Agricultural College, desiring to confess Christ according to his command," and it includes a pledge to be Christ's faithful disciples and "present ourselves for examination, baptism and admission to some evangelical church."³

Clark had left when Uchimura's class registered, but his influence was strong, and the incoming freshmen were greeted by a band of fervent disciples in a manner reminiscent of the early evangelization of Europe. Uchimura resisted, "but alas! mighty men around me were falling and surrendering to the enemy." Soon he alone of the second class had not signed the Covenant and he felt strongly "the extremity and loneliness" to which he was reduced. Leaving the school one afternoon, he visited a Shinto shrine dedicated to the guardian god of the district. "I prostrated myself upon coarse dried grass, and there burst into a prayer as sincere and genuine as any I have

offered to my Christian God since then." He besought the god "to extinguish the new enthusiasm in my college . . . and help me in my humble endeavour in the patriotic cause I was upholding then."⁴

It must be remembered that this was the year 1877 in a country where the profession of Christianity for over two hundred years had been a crime punishable with death; that only ten years previously four thousand "hidden Christians," making public their faith, had been driven from their homes; that many of them had been imprisoned and beaten, a few dying; and that though the notice-boards all over Japan forbidding Christianity had been removed only four years previously, no law repealing the prohibitions against Christianity had yet been passed.

Eut Uchimura had landed into a nest of zealots in the midst of the huge sea of Shinto and Buddhism that Japan then was. "They forced me to sign the covenant . . . somewhat in the manner of extreme temperance men prevailing upon an incorrigible drunkard to sign a temperance pledge. I finally yielded and signed it. I often ask myself whether I ought to have refrained from submitting myself to such a coercion . . . So you see my first step toward Christianity was a forced one, against my will, and I must confess, somewhat against my conscience too."

In spite of himself Uchimura discovered that benefits accrued from this forced conversion. There was only one God, and not eight million to pray to.⁵ There was now no point in repeating long prayers morning and evening to the four gods of the compass, or in praying at each temple he passed in the

street. "Oh how proudly I passed by temples with my head erect and conscience clear, with full confidence that they could punish me no longer for my not saying prayers to them, for I found the God of gods to back me."

His friends noticed a difference in him. His health improved and he no longer observed the dietary restrictions he had imposed on himself. "I thought I comprehended the whole of Christianity, so inspiring was the idea of one God. My studies were pursued with more concentration. Rejoicing in the newly-imparted activity to my body, I roamed over fields and mountains, observed the lilies of the valley and birds of the air, and sought to commune through Nature with Nature's God."⁷

The "Incipient Church" at Sapporo

There slowly developed a period of intense fellowship with his Christian and covenanting classmates, a period of joy in their new-found faith to which Uchimura would look back with nostalgia for the rest of his life. They met regularly on Sundays for Bible reading, exhortation and prayer. There were arguments and questions of course; there was much of their faith which they did not understand and many of the brilliant minds of the new Japan were in the group. They were normal young men and they enjoyed the high spirits and hilarity which young men of their age enjoy the world over.

Of the fifteen freshmen who had signed the covenant, seven formed an inner circle of close friendship. A Methodist missionary, the Rev. M. C. Harris, who had commenced visits to Sapporo, baptized the seven on June 2, 1878.

From his second year till the time of his graduation Uchi-

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mura participated with his comrades in the "incipient church" as he calls it, in the college. Some writers have scornfully dismissed this "church" as merely a handful of young students not yet out of their teens. But after three years' existence it was as much a church as the little *ecclesiae* scattered through Asia Minor in the first century and it has had a continuous existence as the Sapporo Independent Church. The pages in which Uchimura describes its activities make lively reading. "Every one of us stood on the same ecclesiastical footing as the rest of the members. This we found to be thoroughly Biblical and apostolic." Each took turns in leading the worship on Sundays; "he was to be our pastor, priest and teacher — even servant for the day." Each contributed to the refreshments for the Sunday evening meeting and freely helped any one who was in special need.

Six months after his baptism Uchimura and his six companions joined the Methodist Episcopal Church during a visit of Mr. Harris to the city "without scrutinizing pro and con of his or any other denomination. We only knew he was a good man and thought that his church must be good too."³

Visits of missionaries were welcomed; the young church attended the meetings that were held, regardless of the nationality or denomination of the visitors. When they returned to their homes for the summer holidays, they delighted in visiting the churches of the capital and Yokohama, hearing the Word and tilling of the growth of their church in the far north. They were still learning about their new religion and Uchimura tells of the mortification he and a friend suffered at the home of a minister when they started to eat a meal without

waiting for grace

Writing of his friend forty years later, Miyabe says of Uchimura's student days in Sapporo: "he was a real samurai in spirit, being honest, pious, clean and loyal. He was open-minded, willing to listen to his friends' criticism of himself and ready to take their advice. He was so thoughtful that his roommate never found a fault in him that would start a quarrel in the four years that they lived together in the same room."⁹ For the first four years his contacts with the organized church and its representatives were peripheral. In his senior year at college something happened which wounded the feelings of the young disciples deeply.

Up until this time their religious meetings had been held in their college rooms, but towards the end of 1880 we find them discussing the construction or purchase of a church. Additions to membership from outside made it advisable for a fervently evangelistic group to consider expansion. Episcopalian missionaries were already stationed in Sapporo, and some of the band suggested joining this church. The Rev. Davison, who had replaced Harris as visiting Methodist missionary, listened to their discussions one day; Uchimura reports that he disapproved of some aspects of their planning.

The \$ 400 Loan for a Church Building

Six months after the discussions started they still had not made their decision concerning the church building. Then on March 18, 1881 a letter from Davison arrived with an offer of "four hundred dollars to build a church for us. We did not wish to have it given us; we would only borrow it, to be

returned in the earliest possible opportunity."¹⁰

It was then decided to build a church, and while a committee negotiated with a contractor, a debate as to whether the church should be independent or not arose. Uchimura led the independence party and on May 23 he records "the cry for independence is getting the upper hand." Towards the end of the month Davison, visiting them for the third time, preached, administered the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptized. The students told him of their intention to separate from his church, and "he was not well pleased with such an intention."¹¹

The Apostles' Creed was selected as the creed of the church; the discipline was based on the "Covenant of the Believers in Jesus." All members were expected to make some contribution to the life of the church. Special meetings were held and the little building was occasionally filled to "the utmost capacity."¹²

On New Year's Day of 1882 the inauspicious letter, "short, incisive," arrived. Davison could not approve of the formation of an independent church. He therefore asked them to refund "by telegram" (Uchimura's italics) the \$400 he had sent them nine months earlier. The reaction was emphatic and unanimous: at a meeting called to discuss the crisis, the treasurer was instructed to send Davison immediately all the money in the treasury and it was agreed that the balance should be repaid as soon as possible. Five days later \$200 was remitted by telegraphic money order and the balance was repaid before the year was out.¹³

Uchimura states unequivocally, "We borrowed the money, though the mission said it would be given to us" and it is clear that this was the understanding on the part of the young

Christians.¹⁴ On the other hand he does not quote any part of Davison's letter other than the excerpt given above ; apart from the brief sentences quoted on the occasion of Davison's visit of May, nothing is reported of what Davison said then nor is there any indication as to whether they received any further communication from him prior to January 1. In short, we do not know the other side of the story.

The "apparently trivial incident," as it has been called — many serious missionary blunders spring from "trivial incidents" — was momentous for Uchimura.¹⁵ For many years after this he was to cooperate with Japanese churches, preaching, teaching Sunday School classes, participating as a delegate in a national Christian conference and similar gatherings and maintain normal and happy relationship with missionaries in different cities where he lived. But the damage had been done. The shock of what denominationalism involved was initial proof to him that the organized church, dominated by missionaries, was not the church for Japan.

III

LIFE AS A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

Hitherto emphasis has been laid on the religious interests and activities of Uchimura, but his professional training, the training of a student in an agricultural college, was scientific and it was as a scientist that he entered the service of the Japanese Government on graduating in June, 1881. Except for a period of nine months, from that time till his departure for the United States in November, 1884, he was engaged in marine research and teaching either in Hokkaido or Tokyo. He re-

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tained his scientific interests all his life.

Though he delighted in science, his life as a civil servant repelled him. Before he had been a twelvemonth in government service he was writing to Miyabe: "My present position is loathsome, oppressive, unsatisfactory and corruptive. I have almost nothing to do at present. Our head officers do not know the utility of science."¹⁶ He abhorred the venality, fawning and flattery of the officials under whom he worked. "We can *see* the corruptions everywhere in our country, but to feel and have experience with its most degraded forms, there is no place, I think, so favorable as Hokkaido."¹⁷

However he had become responsible for the support of his family; his father had failed in business and relatives had moved in with them in Tokyo. He did not know what other profession to follow. Together with typical expressions of joy in his faith, his letters at this period contain exclamations of despair.

IV

FIRST MARRIAGE

In the midst of these doubts and despairs, however, he was busy preaching and lecturing on the Bible in the main island. It was in the course of one of his visits to a church in a small town that he met Také Asada, a young woman who was to prove temporarily so disastrous to the life of the young idealist. The marriage went wrong from the first. Years later Uchimura told Nobu, the daughter of this unhappy union, that when at length Také, accompanied by her brother, did formally leave Uchimura's house — "I watched your mother's figure

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as she walked away, threw myself down on the veranda and wept."¹⁸

The Také affair marked the third phase in Uchimura's estrangement from the churches. The first was his fellowship in the Christian group of students at Sapporo and the second the Davison affair. He was by this time becoming well known in the Japanese Christian community, and the churches strongly felt that he was betraying the cause.

— To be continued —

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NOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

CW—*Complete Works of Uchimura Kanzō*

SW—*Selected Works of Uchimura Kanzō*

JCQ—*Japan Christian Quarterly*, Vol. XII, 1937.

H & C—*Japan's Modern Prophet: Uchimura Kanzō*. John Howes and Otis Cary (unpublished in 1963)

Masaïke—*Uchimura Kanzo Den* (Life of Uchimura Kanzō).
Masaïke Megumu.

Nijijima—Letters between Uchimura Kanzo and Nijijima Jo, 1885—
1888. (Unpublished)

I

1—Masaïke, p. 5.

2—CW., XV, p. 14

II

3—Ibid. pp. 15, 16.

9—JCQ, pp. 15, 16.

4—Ibid. p. 16

10—CW., XV, p. 42.

5—Ibid.

11—Ibid. p. 47.

6—The Japanese phrase for their native

12—Ibid. d. 57.

Gods is "*Yaoyorozu no kami*," "eight
million gods."

13—Ibid. pp. 60 and 65.

14—Ibid. p. 60

7—CW., XV, pp. 18, 19.

15—Howes & Cary, p. 14.

8—Ibid. p. 28

III

16—Letter of June 15, 1882, CW.,
XX, p. 48.

17—Ibid. p. 47.

IV

18—Letter of October 27, 1884, CW., XX, p. 126