

JAPAN'S RELIGIOUS SCENE, 1978-79

- Illustrations of a trend -

Seen from the outside, Japan's religious scene might seem rather desolate. Usually only events with a certain spectacularity about them are able to stir the interest of the mass media and, consequently, of the general public. Examples are the ongoing troubles in the Higashi-Honganji sect of Pure Land Buddhism (for an English-language account of its vicissitudes up to 1976, see Notto R.Thelle, "Power struggle in Shin Buddhism," in Japanese Religions, 9/3: 64-75), and still more typically, the quarrels between the priests of the Nichiren Shōshū sect and the Sōkagakkai, one of its lay organizations, which ultimately led to the resignation of the latter's president Ikeda Daisaku at the end of April 1979. (Interestingly enough, the press coverage of the death and election of two popes in 1978 was extraordinarily wide for a country which otherwise shows very little interest for what happens in its own small Roman Catholic Church. This might be interpreted as reflecting the still growing Japanese sensitivity to catching up with the news items that cause a stir in Western countries.)

Seen from the inside, of course, life is much more flourishing, and each religion no doubt will claim that its own group -- or, what is often more important in Japan, its leaders -- are the most active and the most influential in society at large. The awarding of the Templeton Prize to Niwano Nikkyō, president of the Risshō Kōseikai, in the beginning of 1979 might be a case in point. It was certainly a matter for rejoicing for the members of that organization and, to a certain extent at least, for the religious world of Japan as a whole. But the event was largely ignored by the mass media. On the other hand, however, the role of Niwano as a "fixer" in politics seems to be gradually drawing the attention of a number of popular magazine writers.

Indeed, if events on the religious scene are judged to be worthy of notice, it is mainly in terms of their connection to the political world, illustrating once more the "primacy of political values" in Japanese society and culture. The present political scene of Japan remains dominated by the prospect of the birth of a coalition government in the not too distant future, and more generally, by the tensions between the forces of nationalism and internationalism, both of them vying for supremacy in shaping the future of the country. The religious organizations and religiosity in general are factors which cannot possibly be disregarded altogether in this respect, not even in a "secular" state like Japan.

The Shūseiken

One concrete example of a point of encounter between the world of politics and the world of religion which clearly illustrates their present relationship is the establishment and the activities of the Shūkyō seiji kenkyūkai 宗教政治研究会 (The Association for the Study of Religion and Politics), usually abbreviated to Shūseiken. The Shūseiken is a study group of more than forty Diet members belonging to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party who are explicitly affiliated with religious bodies or at least openly backed by them in their political career. Established on November 1, 1977, a year later the group celebrated its first anniversary in a way that could hardly go unnoticed by the mass media. November 1, 1978, being the day on which the official campaign for the presidency of the ruling party (which resulted in the coming to power of Prime Minister Ōhira) started, they cleverly made use of this coincidence to steal the limelight by inviting the main candidates to their celebration party.

To give an idea of what the group's aims are, we present here a tentative translation of the "Prospectus of The Association for the Study of Religion and Politics" as it was first enounced at the time of its establishment and often reaffirmed afterwards.

Individual and group egoism is spreading, not only in the fields of politics, of economics and of education, but in all areas of the people's life. Day by day this trend is growing more intense in present-day society, so that it has become a matter of the gravest concern for us. There even exists a fear that, if this trend continues, we will no longer be able to sustain the present harmony and prosperity of the human race and of the nation.

While probing into this problem we have reached the conviction that there is no way to save this situation other than the cooperation between religion and politics. Properly speaking, religion bears the basic responsibility for the salvation of the individual, while on the other hand, politics is closely related to all problems of society, of the nation, of the world. We think that only when both join their activities will it be possible to build up an ideal society and nation.

However, in our country the relationship between religion and politics has been an extremely weak one. Therefore, with the eye on the coming new century, we politicians free from party and factional cleavages pledge to work closely together with the leaders of the religious world transcending all sectarian divisions. For this purpose, first of all we establish this Group for the Study of Religion and Politics as a gathering where politicians who wish to conduct politics based upon a religious spirit

can study these problems.

Shōwa 52, November 1

It might be helpful to recall, also, that at the time of the group's establishment, another "vision" was also launched, but found to be still too immature, namely the establishment of a Shūkyō sei-ji kyōgikai 宗教政治協議会, a Council in which politicians should actually sit together with religious leaders to discuss problems of common interest.

A Buddhist Reaction

The initial reaction of the religious world to the initiative of those politicians was rather cautious, and not simply because of the so-called "weakness" of the links between religion and politics mentioned in the text above! True to the hallowed tradition whereby most religious organizations in Japan have been firmly in the proestablishment camp, there has, of course, been no want of sympathetic voices. As an example, we present next some excerpts from an Editorial of the Bukkyō Times 仏教タイムス of November 5, 1978, under the title of "The Shūseiken's first anniversary."

When the Shūseiken was established one year ago, there were quite a few people in political circles who kept at a distance, saying "It's a real adventure," "Religion is taboo for politics." The mass media were critical as well, accusing the group of "aiming at votes" or "trying to make use of the religious organizations." Moreover, in the religious world so-called established Buddhism took on a negative posture in view of the fact that the leaders of the Shūseiken, Messrs. Tamaki and Kusunoki, were dietmen respectively backed by the Seichō-no-ie and the Risshō Kōseikai and other religious members of the Union of New Religious Organizations of Japan (Shin Nihon shūkyō-dantai rengō-kai 新日本宗教団体連合会, usually abbreviated into Shinshūren). ... However, during the first year of its existence, the Shūseiken seems to have consolidated its basis very firmly. It has held study sessions twice a month and more than twenty breakfast meetings. Scholars were invited to speak on Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Shinto, and other religions, and also Prime Minister Fukuda and Messrs. Ōhira and Nakasone delivered special lectures. The appearance of these high-leveled politicians might well have exerted a great influence on the increase of the group's membership. ... [As can be seen from the topics chosen for study during the coming year and from the establishment of a special project team], the Shūseiken is not merely a study group for the enrichment of the general education of its members. It has taken a resolute

step forward in the field of action as a policy-making organ. From the very outset the organizers have stressed the basic idea that "it is impossible to act on a religious policy without knowing the essence of religion." Therefore, the religious organizations are not allowed to stand by idly any longer. Was it not the religious leaders who had to reflect religion in politics and who had to stand up? The politicians were ahead of us. Instead of criticizing their motives, we urgently need the conviction and practice for cooperating with them and for leading and controlling this activity.

The New Religions Look Back at 1978

The significance of the Shūseiken and, more generally speaking, the awareness of the importance of politics for Japan's religious organizations also appear very clearly in the leading article published by the Shin Shūkyō Shinbun 新宗教新聞 (organ of the already mentioned Shinshūren) in its last issue of 1978 (Dec. 25), just after the coming to power of new Prime Minister Ōhira. We present a free translation of that very informative article.

The Religious World: Looking Back over the Past Year
--The advancing waves of the world and the mission of the
religious people--
by Kobayashi Daijirō, journalist

The unexpected rise of Ōhira Masayoshi to the premiership has come as a shock to the religious world as well. This is, of course, because there are so many unknown aspects to this man. Although former Prime Minister Fukuda was criticized for his veering to the right, he had a variety of means for contact with the religious world, and we were able to judge what his thinking on religion was. On the other hand, what the opinions of Ōhira are and what kind of policies he wants to carry out are not very clear. As a man of a very cautious nature, this holds even true in the field of economics, in which he is said to be an expert, and this seems to worry the bureaucratic circles a good deal. This is all the more so the case in the realm of religion, which is not his specialty. Aside from the fact that he is a pious Christian, nobody knows what his thinking actually is. Whenever they come together for a meeting, people of the religious world ask each other the question: "What kind of man is Ōhira? What does he think about religion?" But no clear answer is ever forthcoming. As Ōhira's opinion on religion gradually comes to light in the year to come -- whatever form this might take -- it is sure to cause some waves in the religious world.

When we look back at the year that has passed, we have to say that in 1978 the world of religion has been confronted with a number of problems. The first of these was another critical look at religion as a social force. At its origin was the fact that, in the general election for the Upper House in 1977, among the eight candidates who gathered more than one million votes four [of them] relied on the so-called religious votes. Although the Yomiuri Shinbun already had a religious column, as a result of this the Mainichi Shinbun also started putting some effort into a serial on religion. The Asahi Shinbun, tried to cope with religion by organizing a group of people studying this problem, which led to Company Report No. 176 with the title "The Electoral Activities of Religious Organizations: The Present Situation and Prospects for the Future."

Allow me to present here the introductory remarks of that report:

"The last election was focused on the question of whether a reversal would occur between the conservative and reformist forces or, in other words, between the ruling party and the opposition parties. There is no doubt whatsoever that religious votes were behind the fact that the Liberal Democratic Party was able to avoid the crisis. It looks as if the religious organizations constitute the only remaining reservoir of votes for L.D.P., whose one-party-rule basis is steadily crumbling. A movement has even been started in the L.D.P. for establishing a big political alliance of the various religious groups and for realizing a system of cooperation by which both "political" and "religious" organizations should tie up in recommending candidates and in helping each other for the allocation of votes and the raising of electoral funds. This is not only the case for the L.D.P. While proclaiming "separation of religion and politics," the Clean Government Party (Kōmeitō) maintains its close ties with the Sōkagakkai; and the link-up between the Democratic Socialist Party (Minshatō) and some religious groups is no less strong than that of the L.D.P. In the Socialist and Communist Parties as well there exists an uncommonly deep interest in religious organizations. It is no exaggeration to say that one cannot talk about elections without taking the religions into account.

Since the end of the war, and the newly proclaimed freedom of religion, many new religious organizations made spectacular advances, and not a few of them grew to tremendous size. The motivations for conversion are said to have been "illness, poverty, strife." When politics was not able to cope effectively with the changes in society

and with the uncertainty about the future, the masses sought salvation in religion. What brought about the prosperity of the religious organizations, then, was the poverty of politics. And now, the Conservative Party is looking to the religious organizations for salvation."

The Shūseiken may be said to be a group of politicians who anticipated this state of affairs. Since the proposed Shūseikyō (Council of Religion and Politics), which aimed at drawing "religion" into the camp of "politics," did not get off the ground because "religion" did not join forces, the Shūseiken is continuing the flight with only one engine working. Though it was generally thought at the beginning that it would be "short-winded," the group holds on. In what direction will their leader Tamaki Kazuo move, as one of the flag-bearers for the younger Fukuda-faction members, now that Ohira is in power?

Even if "the Conservative Party is looking to the religious organizations for salvation," criticism by the public at large against the religious organizations which have made a display of their power is severe and widespread. The political feeling of the Japanese dislikes the extreme concentration of power and despotism. In former times the religious organizations dazzled the eyes of the public by building grand worship halls one after the other. Now they have demonstrated their overwhelming strength in the electoral field.

Since the beginning of 1978, part of the mass media has taken the attack against the problem of enterprises managed by religious juridical persons and their payment of taxes. These attacks, for the most part, are based upon misunderstandings. But, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that there have been misunderstandings and mistakes on the side of the religions as well. And the tax administrators themselves have begun to take another look at the tax system and to investigate matters case by case, as was reported at the 1977 meeting of the Board of Directors of the Shinshūren in Osaka. As a result of these events, the Nihon Shūkyō Renmei 日本宗教連盟 (Japan Religious League) is trying to dispel the misunderstandings that are the result of the ignorance of religious organizations in matters of law and statutes. Therefore, in cooperation with the governmental Agency for Cultural Affairs, a "Joint study meeting of the administrators of comprehensive religious juridical persons" was held. Following suit, similar meetings are now being held all over the country.

On the other hand, the whole world is giving attention to the attitude and the activities of Japanese religionists in the field of cooperation for peace. On June 12, 1978, Niwano Nikkyō, honorary chairman of the W.C.R.P. (World

Conference on Religion and Peace) and president of the Shinshūren and of the Risshō Kōseikai, delivered an address at the "Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly Devoted to Disarmament," as one of the representatives of twenty-five Non-Governmental Organizations (N.G.O.). He called for the abolition of nuclear weapons and for complete disarmament. In his address he explained that the abolition of nuclear arms is not a vain dream, and that "what all people desire from the bottom of their hearts is not at all an unrealizable thing." He further appealed for a change of heart with the leaders of the world, mentioning expressly that President Carter and Secretary-General Brezhnev should "take major risks for peace and disarmament instead of taking risks with arms" -- words which were very favorably received.

Another news item which became a topic for conversation was the miraculous come-from-behind victory of the P.L. High School in the High School Summer Baseball Tournament. It was a big asset that people appreciated anew that "when one is sustained by religion, one is strong in a fix." On the other hand, the fact that in some weekly magazines this victory was ridiculed should be seen only as an instance of "sentiment" against the power of a great religion and should not lead us to dismiss the whole things as a trifling matter.

In such a climate in which people were taking another look at religion and in which religion was hailed as a kind of savior for the Conservative Party, the turn to the right under Premier Fukuda's government was rather conspicuous. Events illustrative of this were the formal worship at the Yasukuni Shrine by the Premier, and the decision to give government support to the celebration of National Foundation Day by a private organization. One reason why Fukuda lost the premiership to Ōhira might have been the critique that he veered too much to the right. At the same time we, the religious organizations, should also be more willing to listen to the critique of the voiceless public opinion and, where needed, correct our stance. It goes without saying that the religious organizations exist for relieving the suffering and worries of the people who seek salvation, and not for the benefit of a particular political party and those in power. If the religions, which have come to accumulate immense power, lose their self-control and err in the exercise of that power, like the tusks of a mammoth grown too long they will invite self-destruction. When reflecting upon the past year, let this warning sink into our minds.

Japan's "Christian" Prime Minister

From these texts we can readily infer how closely the religious world of Japan is related to trends in the political area (and not only those in the world of sports!), and how very much aware both sides seem to be of this. The expression "turn to the right" which often appears in this connection aptly describes the present situation in this country, and could be illustrated with many examples. Readers who are familiar with Japan will think at once of such problems as the legislation of the Imperial era names; the continuing efforts to put the Yasukuni Shrine, and eventually also other shrines, under government control; and so many other, seemingly unimportant movements which actually betray a basic trend with strong nationalistic overtones. It would take us too far afield to analyze this trend any further at this point. But no foreign observer of the Japanese religious scene should underestimate the impact of this trend -- a new "self-awakening" of Japan, or to put it still more strongly, a "self-identity crisis" of Japan -- on whatever happens in the world of Japanese religious organizations, whether in their activities within the country itself or in their dialogue and activity for peace on a world scale.

A rather strange element in this whole constellation, and one which was already touched upon in the foregoing section, is the rather unexpected "birth" of a Prime Minister whom the mass media refers to as a "pious Christian." If doubts were expressed at the beginning of his term in office in December 1978, it was apparently more because of his enigmatic character than of his supposed religious convictions. In fact, at this very moment, Premier Ōhira's "Christian Beliefs" have certainly not been used as an excuse for countering the nationalistic trend inherited from his predecessor(s), at least not insofar as religiously laden symbolism is concerned. The outstanding example is the formal visit that Ōhira also paid to the Yasukuni Shrine at the time of its spring festival on April 21, 1979, allegedly as a "private citizen," but nevertheless in an official car and accompanied by other government officials. Moreover, the visit came a few days after it was made public that Tōjō Hideki and a group of other "A-class war criminals" had been enshrined as kami in the Yasukuni Shrine.

Judging from what happened in Japanese history, it is not surprising that the Christian minority in this country, and particularly some Protestants, are among the fiercest opponents of everything that even remotely smacks of prerogatives for Shinto and a resurgence of militarism. To what extent they seriously expected from the "Christian" Prime Minister something of a brake on trends in this direction is a moot question. But the fact is that, in Shinto circles, abundant use is made of the epithet "pious Christian" whenever Ōhira's actions favoring their cause are reported, creating the impression that other Christians are actually not too Christian-minded when opposing actions which their illustrious co-believer

does not fail to perform as an exemplary Japanese citizen. Yet, what does this "Christian faith" of the Japanese Premier actually mean?

According to the Protestant weekly Kirisuto Shinbun キリスト新聞 of Dec. 9, 1978, Ōhira Masayoshi, born in 1910 in Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku, became a member of a small Protestant denomination when a student at a Commercial High School in the city of Takamatsu. He was engaged in street evangelism and continued life as a Christian believer for a period after entering university in Tokyo. Church records mention that he was baptized on Dec. 22, 1929, in Shikoku.

When Ōhira was first elected to the Lower House as a representative for Kagawa Prefecture in 1967, he declared to a reporter of the Christian weekly:

"At present I do not go to church nor do I possess a faith that can be spoken of in front of other people. But I can not live away from the Bible. I continue talking with God in prayer."

On Nov. 30, 1978, the evening before he assumed the premiership Ōhira declared through a secretary that he had "an understanding of Christianity." He further answered to the following three questions asked him by a reporter of the Protestant weekly.

Question 1: What do you think about being called a Christian Prime Minister?

Answer: I have had some experience in Bible study and have been engaged in evangelic work. But I do not have the self-confidence to be called a Christian Prime Minister.

Question 2: What do you think about what you said eleven years ago? (see the declaration of 1967, cited above.)

Answer: I feel the same now as at that time.

Question 3: What do you think about worshiping at the Ise Grand Shrine and the Yasukuni Shrine?

Answer: The Shrine problem, including that of Yasukuni, is quite a difficult one. I am thinking at the moment of how to handle the public observances connected with Japan's (Shinto) rituals.

We may conclude with another revealing statement of the Premier regarding his faith, again as reported by the Kirisuto Shinbun in its issue of March 24, 1979. According to that report, Ōhira is said to have talked about his "Christian faith" in the following terms when he made an appearance at a breakfast meeting of the Shūseiken on June 6, 1978, at that time still in the capacity of Secretary-General of the L.D.P.

Question: Mr. Ohira, did you ever have in your life the experience of being especially aware of religion, of having bumped against a sort of wall and of having sought a way of overcoming this in religion?

Answer: Frankly speaking, I have not yet had such a religious experience. To be sure, when I was young I received baptism and went to listen to sermons. I was genuinely enthusiastic about the Christian movement. I even preached myself on the streets. But when I look back at that period now and try to say what it all really meant, I think that, as a twenty year-old there was a kind of strong thirst in my heart. And in order to quench this thirst, one can turn to sports, to romantic love, to religion. It's time when one has to go somewhere.... Well, I happened to turn to religion. Isn't that something like running to God at a time when one is overcome with worry to the limits and doesn't know where to go....?

Let us only add that this question of the Prime Minister's religious beliefs, and of their influence on the course that Japan might take in the future, seems to be a matter of some concern in religious and political circles (including the temptation to put them to promotional uses for one cause or the other), but of not much importance for the general public. For the most part they suffer the trends in society without much questioning, and, as we stated in the beginning, religious issues continue to come to the level of awareness only when there is a certain spectacularity about them.

Jan Swyngedouw