

Christian Periodical Literature in Japan

An Overview

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IT IS A WELL KNOWN FACT that Christians are only one percent of the entire population of Japan. In spite of the relatively small number of Christians, there are many Christian periodicals intended for both the clergy and the laity. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of what Japanese Christians in general are reading and thinking on church affairs and other related issues. The magazines reviewed here are all monthly magazines that appeared between January 1991 and March 1992. All the magazines treated here are ones that are subscribed to by Wesley Hall at Aoyama Gakuin University, a United Methodist-related institution of higher learning. Their special features are the main focus of our attention.

ISSUES ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Japanese society is sometimes likened to a group of people sitting cross-legged in a circle with their backs to the outside world. Christianity has been challenging that sort of ingrown and exclusive tendency. One manifestation of that challenge has been

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Christians' strong interest in universal justice. The June 1991 issue of *Friend of the Laity* (Shinto no Tomo) and the February 1991 issue of *The Bible and the Church* (Seisho to Kyōkai) carried feature articles on the right of children to live in an open and humane environment. All the articles share the following assumption: Japanese children are blessed materially but impoverished spiritually. They are made to think that happiness consists of material opulence and social prestige.

In *Friend of the Laity*, Enomoto Eiji, principal of a Christian high school in northern Japan, finds the cause of this spiritual impoverishment of children in the values system of Japanese society in general and its educational system in particular. Japanese society indoctrinates children to think that their ultimate worth is judged by their usefulness for and loyalty to it. Consequently, the ability to think for themselves and to develop a unique individuality of their own is regarded as an obstacle to national interest. This emphasis on collective uniformity often makes children insensitive and callous toward those who look different from themselves.

According to Saeki Yukio, a local pastor, whose article appeared in *The Bible and the Church* (Seisho to Kyōkai), such a tendency among children is most clearly revealed in their inability to identify themselves with the plight of the handicapped, for example.

Saeki is convinced that Japanese Christians have inner resources to tackle this problem. For, after all, their fundamental existence is deeply rooted in the sacred worth of every individual under God. Christians are best equipped to challenge Japanese collectivism.

The Living Word (Inochi no Kotoba), an evangelical magazine, tackled the issue of the separation of church and state in its February 1992 issue. Ikejiri Ryōichi of the Gospel Fellowship Association points out that Japan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion for every citizen. No one may be forced to take part in any religious rite or practice. And the State must refrain from imposing any religious education or religious activity on its citizens. Yet, in reality, this freedom is often violated. For example, high school athletes are required to attend a victory prayer at a Shinto shrine. Corporations often require workers to attend Shinto ground breaking rituals.

Ikejiri gives the following example of his own. Like any other town throughout Japan, it was a custom of his town association to give money to the nearby Shinto temple on auspicious occasions. A few years ago, he protested that custom, insisting that such practice violated the constitutional right of freedom of religion. As a result of his protest, he and his family were barred from all activities of the town association. The attitudes of their neighbors suddenly became unfriendly and, in some cases, down right hostile.

Ikejiri suggests that there are basically two options open to Christians facing violations of the separation of church and state: to find ways to educate the public on the importance of the issue involved, and to cultivate support from non-Christians.

Another area of public concern with regard to human rights in Japan is the poor treatment received by a large number of menial workers coming from Third World

countries. Hired for cheap labor, they are victims of cultural, racial, and ethnic prejudices. So far, the government and the public have shown little concern for their plight. *Friend of the Laity* calls for the readers' attention to this new social problem in the March 1992 issue.

Maejima Munetoshi, executive director of the National Christian Council in Japan, thinks that churches should grab the sudden influx of foreign workers as a God-given opportunity to challenge the provincial and exclusive tendencies of Japanese society. He encourages local churches to become the vanguard for raising the level of public concern for the plight of these workers.

In the same issue, Matsuda Mizuho of the Women's Temperance Union points out that since Japan has become dependent upon those workers for menial labor, mutuality and good will are essential on the part of the Japanese people. And yet, it is the consistent policy of the Japanese government to regard foreign laborers as the basic source of social unrest. Such a negative attitude by the state further encourages prejudice and discrimination in the public realm. Matsuda is convinced that establishing laws guaranteeing the civil rights for all residents in Japan regardless of national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds is a must for this country.

Friend of the Laity includes an article on a Christian lawyer spearheading a group of people who seek to have the Ministry of Public Welfare provide foreign workers with much needed medical insurance. Also featured is a young woman pastor who is a strong advocate for the rights of Asian women working in Japan.

INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Gulf War forced Japanese people to deal with the so-called peace clause of Japan's constitution (Article 9).

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes . . . sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

What is Japan's responsibility as a nation that declares itself to be pacifist in the midst of international tension? The August 1991 issue of *The Gospel and the World* (Fukuin to Sekai) dealt with that specific question. Sasagawa Norikatsu, who teaches law at International Christian University, insists that Japan's peace constitution has thus provided the basic direction of post-war Japan despite many attempts to abolish Article 9. The main thrust of Sasagawa's argument is that it is primarily because of Article 9 that Japan has never been a military threat to any neighboring nations since the end of World War II. Then, too, it has prevented Japan from getting on the chauvinistic bandwagon in such international crises as the Gulf War. Just like a pacifist who volunteers for peaceful activities in place of military service, it is incumbent upon Japan to come up with specific ways to use its resources for world peace.

And yet, Shōji Tsutomu, chairperson of the peace committee of the National Christian Council in Japan, makes it clear in the December 1991 issue of *The Gospel and the World* that Japan did participate in the Gulf War by giving the United States a staggering amount of money so that the Bush administration could pursue its own version of power politics. He is convinced that the churches in Japan should take upon itself a similar role played by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.: to point out the moral pretensions of the big powers.

MAKING CHRISTIANITY INDIGENOUS

The Church of Our Own Making (Tezukuri no Kyōkai), a Catholic magazine, lifts up a question in its January 1992 issue that is particularly pertinent to both Protestants and Catholics: the hopes and yearnings of people whose spouses do not share the same religious faith.

A non-Christian husband confesses that his wife's baptism was a terrible shock to him. As far as he was concerned, her baptism was indicative of her inner dissatisfaction with him as her husband. Her subsequent involvement in the congregational life deepened his sense of alienation from her. She occasionally asks him to go to church with her and he complies just to please her. The atmosphere of the church is too foreign for him and he does not feel comfortable. He continues to be mystified by his wife's conversion to Catholicism. Even today he is still troubled by the thought that what is most important for her is not her own husband but her church.

Another contributor is a non-Christian woman whose Catholic husband is actively involved in helping political refugees adjust to life in Japan as an enthusiastic volunteer. She participates in church activities with her husband but does not feel compelled to become a Catholic. And yet, she confesses having felt genuine joy when her husband was baptized. She respects his faith and knows that he respects her decision to remain as she is. Contrary to the prevailing view in Japanese society, she does not think that husband and wife need to agree on everything to be happy. The root of happiness, she says, lies in keeping individuality and mutuality in balance.

Another wife writes that her non-Catholic husband goes to church with her on Christmas and Easter and did not object to their children's baptism. She attributes his tolerance to

the mutual covenant she had made with him at the time of their engagement that she would be free to raise their children Catholic. Her fervent hope is that someday they may say grace together before meals. Although she keeps these hopes to herself, she feels that he appreciates her for cherishing them.

The case of another Catholic woman is quite different. Her husband is interested in Oriental philosophy, though he has never been openly hostile to Christianity. She is thankful for his open-mindedness and yet troubled by his continuous indifference to the Catholic faith. She cannot help but wonder that his indifference reflects the shallowness of her faith. She confesses that she never passes a single day without praying for her husband's conversion to Catholicism.

Other articles, however, make it clear that there are people whose Christian faith incurs their spouses' displeasure. For example, one husband expresses his dislike for his wife's going to Sunday Mass. After all, Sunday is the only day that the family can be together. What should Christians' attitude be in such a case? One woman says that as she eats Sunday breakfast with her family, she reflects on Jesus' words at the Last Supper. That way, she participates in the Mass, though she is not actually in church. She often dreams about her husband kneeling beside her in church to receive Christ's body, although she does not think that God expects her to disrupt her marriage by verbalizing those dreams.

Another Catholic magazine, *Dawn* (Akebono), carries a symposium entitled "Anxiety and Religion" in its January 1992 issue. Young Japanese nowadays choose to be married in a Christian ceremony, have their babies named in Shinto style, and are buried in a Buddhist rite. Are such phenomena indicative of Japanese tolerance for religion?

A Buddhist nun named Aoyama Shundō thinks it is, whereas a Catholic theologian, Okumura Ichiro, points out a particular shortcoming that this kind of polytheism contains: the lack of real commitment to any religion. Both agree with another panel member, a secular journalist named Tomura Tamihiko, that it is the fate of all religions to walk on a tight rope between assimilation and isolation. What is clear to them is that Christianity has been facing this problem in a unique way. If Christians embrace assimilation with unqualified enthusiasm, their faith will lose its identity and uniqueness. But if they insist on isolating themselves from the culture and society around them, their faith will become esoteric and irrelevant. The indigenization of Christianity will be impossible, however, if it avoids taking risks.

Another challenge that needs to be met by Japanese Christians comes from the popular assumption that the churches are for older generations. Somehow the churches themselves have capitulated to this prevailing view, thinking that for today's young people all religious talk is irrelevant and meaningless.

In its October 1991 issue, *The Bible and the Church* questioned that notion under the headline, "Young People's Culture and the Church." The consensus of the articles on this issue is that the churches must overcome their tendency to proclaim the gospel without understanding where young people really are. More often than not, the churches end up giving a stone instead of bread. According to Ōgushi Genryō, a local pastor who also teaches at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, this kind of spiritual arrogance on the part of the churches is the major cause of young people's rejection of the Christian message. The truth of the matter is that young people are desperately in need of it; the churches will miss a grand op-

portunity for mission, warns Ōgushi, if they persist in their own ways.

As Izumi Takashi of Meiji Gakuin University sees it (in the same issue), despite their rigid individualism and absolute emphasis on feeling, today's young people have a deep yearning for authenticity and genuine fulfillment. For, after all, much of their thinking and life style are a protest against the rigid materialism imposed on them by the success-oriented Japanese society. Both Ōgushi and Izumi reach similar conclusions: if churches are serious about making the gospel relevant to Japan's young people today, they should not waste their energy trying to be pop and gimmicky. Rather, what churches need to do is to present themselves as a viable and concrete alternative to our success-oriented society—genuine communities of faith, love, and charity.

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

One topic that comes up periodically among Protestant magazines of liberal persuasion is the emperor system. *The Bible and the Church* points out, in its February 1991 issue, the fundamental contradiction of Japan's constitution: the emperor being the symbol of the Japanese people.

According to Asami Sadao, an Old Testament scholar, the most problematic aspect of the emperor system is the assertion that all Japanese are related by blood to the emperor. The emperor system by definition cannot be inclusive; it excludes in principle the non-Japanese portion of the population as outsiders to genuine community. The question that Asami raises can be summarized thusly: how can the constitution uphold simultaneously both the emperor system and the universal concept of popular sovereignty?

What remains to be seen is whether the Japanese people can instill in themselves a

sense of responsibility, a critical spirit, and a high vision of universal community. The editorial of the October 1991 issue of *The Gospel and the World* credits Christian schools for having done exactly that. And yet, the truth of the matter is that those schools, too, have been fighting an uphill battle to maintain their own Christian identity against the forces of assimilation and acculturation.

As Kinowaki Etsurō, professor at Fukuoka Women's College, points out, this tension has been increasing in view of the fact that Christian schools, particularly women's schools, have been valued for such things as English language education and an open campus atmosphere. Individual uniqueness, the spirit of independence, and a global perspective, all of which are rooted in Christian values, are either pushed aside as inconsequential or, worse, regarded as harmful to young Japanese women.

This presents a formidable challenge especially to Christian women's schools. Their place in the future of Japanese education, says Kinowaki, depends on their willingness to meet creatively the challenge of assimilation and acculturation. Concretely put, their future depends upon their continuous ability to produce women who can effectively criticize the provincial and ingrown character of Japanese society as a whole.

Friend of the Laity tackles another important cultural issue pertinent to Japanese Christians; namely, funeral customs. How should the Christian understand funerals in Japan? Is it theologically justified to make funerals staggeringly expensive in compliance with social custom? In its November 1991 issue, Murakami Hiroshi, a pastor-theologian, gives the reader a valuable guide in answering these questions.

The meaning of a Christian funeral is this: to commit the dead to the merciful care of God. At death all the earthly possibilities of a human being are extinguished. There is

absolutely nothing that the living can do for the dead. Both the living and the dead are absolutely dependent upon God. Christian funerals literally act out this fervent trust in God's mercy and goodness. Murakami suggests, therefore, that anything that gets in the way of this affirmation must be avoided. Christian funerals are to be simple in form and dignified in style.

Kamuro Jun'ichi, pastor of a local church, believes that a Christian funeral presents an excellent opportunity for Christian witness. It is the most appropriate time to invite people to ponder what it was that ultimately sustained the departed. It is at a time like this we all realize that what makes life significant and good is not the social status we have achieved or even the quality of our virtues. Rather, it is the grace of Almighty God that makes human life ultimately worthy, sacred, and good. Therefore, Kamuro, too, insists that Christian funerals must be both simple in form and dignified in style.

OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

The destruction and misuse of the natural environment by human technology have become an increasingly serious problem in Japan since the 1950s. Evangelicals are engaging in self-criticism in that they have been complacent about this important issue for too long. This is the starting point of Okano Masayoshi's feature article in the March 1992 issue of *The Living Word*. The theological positions that churches must preach the salvation of the human soul and that all problems on earth will be solved at the Second Coming of Christ are singled out as the basic causes of the evangelical complacency. It is time for Christians to interpret afresh God's intention for humankind revealed in the Book of Genesis to "subdue" the earth and to "have dominion over" it.

One clue to a new interpretation of God's commandment, according to Okano, is

found in Jesus' admonition to his disciples: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." From this perspective, it is clear that "to have dominion over" the world means for us to be instruments of God's peace. Such an understanding is directly opposite to exploitation and despoliation.

Another clue to a right approach to the divine commandment to "subdue" and to "have dominion over" God's creation is found in the biblical understanding that God's salvation is intended not exclusively for the human soul but for God's entire creation. Therefore, Paul's Letter to the Romans proclaims that when human beings are finally restored, nature will also share in the freedom from bondage to decay and in the glorious liberty. In the wonderful vision of Isaiah, heaven and earth will be restored and all will be at peace. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food." Okano concludes that this sort of vision is absolutely essential in order to preserve spiritual energy and moral passion needed for restoring God's kingdom.

Friend of the Laity carries in its January 1991 issue an interview with Yamano Shigeko of the Asian Resource Center of the National Christian Council of Churches in Japan. Yamano singles out Japan as the nation most responsible for devouring natural resources of other Asian countries. Deforestation is a case in point. Much of the timber in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea is being used for the luxurious life style of Japanese people.

Even more alarming is what Japan is doing to other Asian nations with its Overseas Development Aid. Building dams in India and Indonesia in the name of modernization has displaced a large number of indigenous people and made them rootless

wanderers. Yamano is convinced that effective laws must be established to give voice to indigenous people for the preservation of their culture and the protection of their life style. It is incumbent upon churches in Japan to raise the level of the public consciousness on this hidden aspect of Japan's economic domination.

The September 1991 issue of *Dawn* discusses the problem of aging. Its feature article is a dialogue between Alfons Deeken, a German priest teaching at Sophia University, and Shimoyama Natsuki, a social worker whose main concern is the care of the elderly. Both Deeken and Natsuki challenge the common notion that Japanese society respects and honors the elderly. The elderly are often left to themselves without any encouragement for social participation of any kind. They are to be encouraged, therefore, to be more active in society in their own way. The wisdom and life experiences of the elderly must be appreciated and treasured by society as a whole. Christians can be catalysts for such a vision of a humanized society. For, after all, the sense of individual worth, the spirit of humor, and the volunteer spirit, to cite only a few, are important elements of the Christian faith.

The November 1991 issue of *Dawn* carries a dialogue between two doctors on the question of dying with dignity. The level of concern for terminal care among Japanese physicians has been steadily rising over the past fifteen years. And yet, the truth of the matter is that the over-all emphasis of big hospitals is almost exclusively upon "cure," and not "care."

Yoro Takeshi, professor of medicine at the University of Tokyo, thinks that the spirit of humility is essential for doctors treating the terminally ill; for that alone can prevent them from regarding patients as objects used for medical research. Kawano Hiroomi, foremost advocate of terminal care and the hos-

pice program in Japan, points out another persistent problem pertaining to modern medical care: the paralyzing fear of pain prevailing among today's people. Neither doctors nor patients are equipped to discern any saving grace in the situation of the terminally ill.

In that kind of situation, Kawano believes that a fresh and deeper understanding of "healing" will be helpful for humanizing the process of dealing with the terminally ill in modern medicine. For Kawano, healing is a religious concept. It is a spiritual process in which the goodness and meaningfulness of a dying person are clarified and affirmed in spite of excruciating pain and imminent death. If this healing process takes place among the patient, the family, and the doctors, meaninglessness and total despair can be overcome.

In the same issue of *Dawn*, Father Inoue Yōji warns the reader of applying Western values directly to the Japanese situation without taking into account value differences of the two cultures. The individual's right to die with dignity is a case in point. Japanese people are increasingly more open to the Western view that it is the personal right of the individual to reject any medical measures to prolong life. According to this view, the ultimate decision of whether to prolong life or not rests upon the patient. But in Japan, points out Inoue, the patient is the last person to be informed of the nature of his or her illness. More often than not, the family acts bravely to conceal the nature of the illness from the patient. Therefore, warns Inoue, the Western understanding of the patient being the final decision maker simply does not apply to the average Japanese.

One social issue that has been pushed to the forefront of public consciousness by concerned women in Japan over the last ten years is the commercialization of sex by the

sex industry. Teenage pregnancies, sex tours to other Asian nations by Japanese men and an open market for pornography are the problems touched on in the feature article of the February 1991 issue of *Dawn*.

Wakabayashi Kazumi, a journalist, and Kanematsu Sachiko, a social worker, focus their attention on sexual exploitation rooted in the inferior status of Japanese women. The national law specifically prohibiting prostitution notwithstanding, sex in Japanese society is often regarded as a natural impulse to be satisfied, not a covenant relationship to be cherished. For today's young people, the norm of sexual morality is derived from a statistical average of how people behave. Consequently, the exploitative misuse of sex has become rampant. Both women would like to see Japanese Christians take a strong lead in propagating the humanitarian view that one's sexual partner is a person to be respected, not used, and that human sexuality requires the discipline of self-control.

The Gospel for a Million People (Hyakumannin no Fukuin) deals with psychogenic disorders that have been getting public attention in Japan almost as much as human sexuality in recent years. Its articles include an interview with Tamura Mayumi, who became a Christian in the midst of her struggle with severe psychological depression. She is now a leader of a Christian group seeking to educate people on manic depression.

At the time of hospitalization, Tamura was overwhelmed by shame and the sense of dishonor; hospitalization was, to her, a stark revelation of her ultimate failure as a human being. She feels that such an interpretation of depression is particularly strong among Christians and has been an enormous obstacle to their healing. More often

than not, Christians tend to think that they could have avoided psychogenic disorders had their faith been stronger. Manic depression for them is not only mental failure but religious failure as well. Tamura is convinced that Christians must be liberated from this kind of oppressive guilt. It is her opinion that local churches have enormous resources for healing in this area.

In the same issue of *Dawn*, Kudō Nobuo, a psychiatrist at Yodogawa Christian Hospital, criticizes Japanese society for its propensity to regard those who suffer from manic depression as shallow and frivolous individuals. Actually, says Kudō, his patients take life much more seriously than "normal" people. And yet, the group consciousness of Japanese people makes it difficult for them to overcome preconceived notions and existing prejudices. For him, as for Tamura, the churches' responsibility is clear: to provide a concrete human fellowship where everyone is accepted as equal.

Even from our cursory overview of monthly Christian periodicals in Japan, it is obvious that Japanese Christians' concerns and interests are deep and many-sided. They are dependent upon these magazines for daily illumination, encouragement, spiritual nourishment, and overall Christian education. One must understand, furthermore, that most of the magazines perused here are intended for the laity whose background in Christianity has been limited to seekers' classes and the Sunday School. In spite of these limitations, however, they render invaluable service, particularly to those who are not able to participate regularly in congregational life for various reasons, some of which are described in articles mentioned in these pages.