

The Role of Protestant Christian Education in Relation to the Japanese Educational Situation

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PROTESTANTISM IN JAPAN has been devoted to education from the beginning of its history. As a result, Protestant Christian education has been practiced in a variety of contexts. The church conducts the church school (Sunday school) as well as other educational activities. There are more than one thousand church-related kindergartens and nursery schools. According to the latest statistics (1992), there are forty universities or colleges, fifty-two junior high schools and nineteen elementary schools belonging to the Education Association of Christian Schools. In addition, the YWCA, YMCA, and other social work institutions and social action groups are engaged in educational activities on the periphery of church and society.

Present-day Christian education on every level is faced with many problems. Sunday schools and church-related kindergartens and nursery schools have been seriously affected by a sudden decrease in the number of participating children. Christian parents have failed to pass on their faith to the next generation. The church was once said to exist for youth, but recently it is losing young people and becoming a congregation of elderly people. In Christian schools, classes in Bible and Christianity from the junior high school to the college level often do not deeply touch the students' hearts. There is a wide chasm between the understanding of Christian faith among clergy and lay people as well as between those who are liberal and those

who are conservative. Given such situations, Christian education or educational ministry is obliged to ask questions about its identity, role, and practice.

The fundamental message of the Christian faith is grounded in the eternal message of the Bible, but this message must be interpreted and understood in the contexts of daily life. What Christian education is and how it should be practiced can only be considered in particular settings. Christians discern meaning through their faith and live by that meaning in the contexts in which they find themselves.

The rubric of Christian education encompasses, at the very least, the two foci of Christian faith and education. Christian education functions to communicate Christian faith. In fulfilling this task, Christian education provides an educating, ministering, and caring service. It helps to facilitate the growth of persons in faith. Also, at least from the perspective of educational institutions, Christian education must be deeply concerned with issues related to education in society in general. Since it necessarily concerns itself with the quality of education in society, Christian education addresses the concrete situations of people in education.

As one of the basic functions of society and nation, education inevitably encounters many problems. At times, education functions as a tool to oppress people and protect the profits of the privileged, ruling class. Such education robs many people of

their human dignity and rights. On the other hand, education has the potential for liberating people and helping them to recover their human dignity.

Through the long history of Christianity, the educational ministry of the church has functioned in both oppressive and liberating ways. If, in today's situation, Christian education is to take serious notice of the biblical understanding of human beings and the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it must struggle to find ways to encourage human liberation. This means that Christian education must be critically cautious about the current educational theories and practices that tend to deprive people of their dignity and rights. Christian education must be very careful to uncover these distortions in present educational practices while addressing issues that are neglected in public education.

Christian faith and education mainly concern people. The educational situation cannot be separated from people. Therefore, an understanding of people in their present educational contexts must precede a consideration of what Christian education should be. In this paper, I will first address the issue of how people are being affected by the current educational situation in Japan then, on the basis of this understanding, discuss the role of Christian education within the Japanese context.

ROOTS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

The present educational context is grounded in the common ideas about education fostered throughout Japan's history. When the Tokugawa regime was replaced by the new Meiji government in 1868, the people who took political power recognized the importance of education for the modernization and building of the nation. They worked hard to establish a nationwide educational system. In September 1871, the Ministry of

Education was established as a bureau of the central government. Its first job was to initiate a modern educational system throughout the country. This new school system actually began in 1872. The nation was divided into six major educational districts, each with a state university. The districts were divided into several middle school districts and these were divided into many elementary school districts. Tokyo Imperial University (now Tokyo University) was organized as the first state university in 1877. Its purpose was to educate the leaders needed for building the nation.

In order to give unity to Japan's educational practice, the government recognized the importance of defining the fundamental goals of education. To develop the type of education needed to foster its image of the ideal Japanese citizen, the government decided in 1890 to publish the fundamentals of education under the emperor's name as the Imperial Rescript on Education. This document emphasized the uniqueness of the Japanese national identity based on the emperor system; listed the virtues that subjects of the emperor should achieve; and requested the people to sacrifice themselves for the nation. All pupils were requested to learn the Rescript by heart, and it was solemnly read by the principal of every Japanese school on ceremonial occasions. Thus the Rescript became the canon of education until Japan's defeat in the Second World War.

Education in Japan, especially public education, was provided by the government as the means of developing subjects for the emperor. The goal of education, especially on the elementary and secondary levels, was to build a sense of national identity among the people as imperial subjects. Education was important not for the individual but for the nation. Education was practiced by the nation, for the nation, and to the nation. A sense of unity or conformity was required of all Japanese imperial

subjects. This type of education which sought to produce imperial subjects prepared the way for the totalitarianism that led to the Second World War.

The understanding of education in Japan was thus quite different from the Western understanding of education. In most Western countries, education, especially elementary education for the common people, was gained as a result of the people's struggle against authoritarian powers. Elementary education therefore came to be considered as a basic right of the people. In Japan, however, education was understood as an expression of the obligation of the people toward the emperor and the nation.

After Japan's defeat in World War II, the new Constitution promulgated the idea of education as a right of the people. The idea of education for imperial subjects was officially swept away. Nevertheless, the idea that education should be provided by the government to train people for the purpose of nation building is still deeply rooted in the psyche of many Japanese. With the tide of economic expansion since the 1960s, education in Japan began to be understood as education for the nation's economic growth. Thus education to produce imperial subjects became education to bolster the economic prosperity of the nation.

The most influential and controlling power in Japanese education has been the postwar economic and industrial circle, which strongly advocated an educational system that would train people who are useful for healthy economic growth. Today, the nurture of people who will be loyal to the company, obey authorities, and work hard is the prevailing hidden goal of Japanese education.

A magazine called *President* is widely read by people in business circles in Japan. Originally the magazine was a Japanese version of the U.S. magazine *President* with translated articles from the English version,

but it did not sell well. After a few years the content was changed to attract Japanese readers. Since then, almost every issue of the magazine has carried articles on well-known military commanders and warriors of Japan and other nations. The war victories of those men are offered as models for Japanese business people. This indicates that many business leaders think of their business in terms of war. Their efforts are concentrated on how to beat others and win business wars. Executives are commanders. Employees are soldiers. It is most important for soldiers to obey the orders of the general. The same kind of pursuit-of-prosperity thinking that led Japan into the Second World War is still alive today.

Education in Japan still tends to put much emphasis on conformity and unity. The virtue of loyalty to the emperor before the war has shifted to loyalty to the company. Everyone should live in a way appropriate to her or his position. As symbols of this conformity, high school and junior high school pupils go to school wearing the same uniforms and carrying the same bags. Junior and senior high school regulations often require the same hair style.

The course of study from elementary school to high school is regulated by the Ministry of Education. According to prevailing national opinion, this kind of curriculum regulation is necessary to maintain the same standards of scholastic achievement throughout the nation. Under this system, the teacher's job is centered on how to accomplish what has already been deemed to be the most effective means of teaching and of enforcing students' moral behavior. In this way, children are controlled by school regulations, and teachers are controlled by the Ministry of Education's regulations.

On the other hand, this education for conformity is quite competitive. Since leadership in Japanese society is decided by the individual's level of education, pupils have to compete with each other in order to

achieve higher standing. The school's function is to select and rank young people. Pupils with excellent grades should be able to enter good schools. The school from which one graduates becomes more important than what one studies at school. Test scores are the most serious concern of pupils and their parents. Pupils have to compete not only with their classmates but also with others from all over Japan. In order to succeed, they have to attend evening and weekend preparatory schools (*juku*) in addition to the formal education at school. Around nine o'clock every night, grade school pupils returning home from *juku* flood the railway stations of Japan.

The three characteristics of conformity, control, and competition (the three C's) function as the hidden curriculum of Japanese education. These latent ideas influence the basic principles and practices of education and express the real values of this culture. Even though these hidden concepts are not written into the official school curriculum, people involved in the educational system establish their identity as they acquire these ideas, consciously or unconsciously. Against this background of the hidden curriculum of the three C's, I would like to suggest some important ways in which to consider the potential role of Christian education in this country.

First, Japanese education is understood in a utilitarian sense, by which the nation sees education as a means of nation building. Education has been seen as a means of attaining a good social position. Paul Tillich spoke of three aspects of education: technical education, humanistic education, and ontological education. In Japan, the technical aspect of education has been emphasized, but the humanistic and ontological aspects of education, which relate to questions of meaning and the deeper dimensions of being human, have largely been ignored.

Secondly, in the present practice of Japanese education, there is the widespread notion that something taught by authoritative people is more important and right than knowledge that is self-acquired. Thus teaching is seen as more momentous and effectual for real education than learning. Since learning is measured by the successful acquisition of transmitted knowledge, education becomes a kind of indoctrination. This indoctrinational style of education is deeply rooted in the subconscious of many Japanese people. Indoctrinational education tends to put much emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge and information by memorization. Further, in this educational context, teachers must instruct students how to live in an appropriate way without jeopardizing group conformity and unity.

Another result of this indoctrinational style is that the educator or teacher is seen as the subject of educational activity and the educatee or the pupil as the object of educational activity. The educator teaches, informs, and disciplines the educatee. The educatee studies and learns the information or knowledge received from the educator and must obey the given instructions or rules. This "subject/object" division is quite common not only in the education of children but also in the education of youth and adults.

These characteristics and ideas allow Japanese education to function effectively in the transmission of knowledge and of a given value system, but it is not very successful in educating people to think for themselves or in creating new value systems. Therefore, the Japanese way of education is effective for maintaining tradition and the status quo.

Another influence to note, in addition to the above-mentioned characteristics of Japanese education, is the recent way of thinking or attitude that may be called the "New Nipponism" (Japanism) or Neo-

Nipponism. This phenomenon of self-confidence is widely prevalent among Japanese people. The new sense of self-confidence attributes Japan's postwar economic success to the superiority of the traditional Japanese ethos and national character. It is the search for a national identity, combined with a nationalistic conservatism, that forms the background of the New Nipponism.

In 1984, a special study committee on Japanese education was organized at the request of then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro. The committee was requested to draw up a blueprint for the revision of education, which had been relatively unchanged since World War II. One of the main conclusions in the final report of the committee, published in 1987, was the necessity for education to promote a greater sense of identity among Japanese people. The paper insisted that public education should teach the uniqueness of Japan and foster among students a self-understanding and identity as Japanese persons. Public education in Japan is currently undergoing a process of revision as a result of this report.

The New Nipponism is supported by some ideologists among influential intellectuals, too. They proclaim the uniqueness and excellence of the Japanese way of living, thinking, and value system. Let me try to depict some of their thinking in relation to Christianity.

These ideologists say that, since Christianity is a monotheistic religion, it is exclusive of other religions and ways of thinking. The intolerance of much Western thought is rooted in Christian thinking. In contrast to Christianity, the typical Japanese religious attitude is polytheistic. Polytheism is tolerant of other religions and thoughts. Since this global age requires tolerance of other cultures, it follows that the Japanese way of thinking has greater validity in the global age.

Another of their affirmations of Japanese thought concerns ecology. Nature is under the dominion of human beings as a result of Western thinking, which is based on the creation story in Genesis. By contrast, a harmonious unity of nature and human beings is characteristic of the traditional Japanese way of life. Therefore, the Japanese way of life or thinking has greater validity or relevance in this ecologically conscious age.

Admittedly, these may represent slightly over-simplified examples of the thinking of the New Nipponists. It is true that all people are proud of their own culture, but if one's own culture is affirmed without critical reflection, the result may be nothing more than a glorification of that culture. Affirmation of one's culture demands a prior critical evaluation. What concerns me about the recent tendency toward New Nipponism is its lack of serious criticism of the traditional Japanese way of thinking and its value system. It seems to represent a simplistic reversion to and admiration of traditional thinking. There is a strong possibility that the New Nipponism will reopen the door to the glorification of the nation.

Having considered the three C's of education and a recent common attitude in Japan, let us consider the role of Christian education in such a context.

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

In order to explore the role of Christian education, it is necessary to clarify some of its characteristics. Christian education cannot exist without Christian faith. The peculiarities and uniqueness of Christian education stem from the Christian faith. Christian faith as eternal truth must be understood in the contexts in which people live. Also, the understanding of faith is related to the believer's awareness of his or her particular context. The following characteristics of

Christian faith provide insight for the examination of the relation of Christian faith to the present educational context in Japan.

Christian education takes seriously the precious existence of the individual person. God created each person to be unique and different. The value of each person is incalculable. Each is loved by God. As such a being, each person has to live responsibly in relation to God.

Faith in Christ frees a person from her or his sin. This means that those who believe in Christ are made free from all kinds of burdens through Jesus Christ. "You are called to freedom" (Galatians 5:13). This is the foundation of Christian freedom. The Christian faith becomes a reality for a person through her or his response to the grace of God as revealed through Jesus Christ. This response must be a free and responsible act. Each person must decide whether or not he or she will respond to the invitation of Jesus Christ. Each individual has the freedom to decide whether she or he will or will not accept God's calling.

People who respond to God's invitation are given faith to pursue life together by sharing their faith. Since each person is created differently from other people and loved by God, individuals look for possibilities to live together and to cooperate. Consequently, they organize a community of faith of their own free will. The cooperation of separate individuals with free will is fundamental in the community of faith.

So individuality, freedom, and life together are the most important elements in Christian faith. Christian education must find its grounding in these three elements of the Christian faith.

The recognition of individuality leads to the recognition of the self. Christian education must help people find their self-identity. It must promote self-understanding, decision making, and learning to live together without losing one's self-identity. In other words, Christian education relates to

meaning that facilitates self-identity, decision making, and community life. People find meaning in a faith and practice that is vital in their particular life situations. Many stories in the Bible tell how, in relationship with God, people found themselves and discovered a new purpose for living. Meaning is deeply related to how I understand myself and other people. Christian education, as education based on Christian faith, should facilitate the discovery and practice of meaning.

It was Paulo Freire who developed the idea of conscientization as the central theme of educational activity. As a committed liberal Christian, he noticed the importance of meaning in education from his experience as an organizer and facilitator of educational programs for literacy in Brazil. He found that learners were highly motivated when they were able to discern the relevancy of the learning content to their own lives. Conscientization is a process of finding who I am or who we are, in what situation I or we live, and how I or we ought to change the present situation. Education as conscientization seeks a path that can liberate people from the situations in which they are obliged to live. The process of conscientization relates to the search for identity, the understanding of present context, and the movement toward a new way of living.

Freire's understanding of education is quite suggestive for Christian education. Christian education can be viewed as a process of conscientization within the context of Christian faith. It must be involved in a process of finding meaning in the Bible and tradition, seeking to understand one's self vis-a-vis that meaning, and practicing that meaning in the situations of life.

However, the biblical way of finding meaning contradicts that of general society. In the Greek tradition, education or *paideia* was understood as an activity that aimed at the pursuit or achievement of the good. *Paideia* was considered a means of achiev-

ing *arete* or goodness.

However, in the New Testament, *paideia* is used in a different context from that of the Greek tradition. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews used the word *paideia* in Chapter 12 to mean the discipline of the Lord. This discipline is different from the regular meaning of discipline. This discipline involves remembering Jesus, the one who endured the cross. We must know ourselves in weakness. "In our struggle against sin or weakness we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding our blood" (Hebrews 12:4). Since he was himself disciplined by God, Jesus is able to sympathize with our weakness (4:15). He was able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself was subject to weakness. Through him, we can find encouragement and comfort in the midst of our weakness. Our hands are drooping and our knees are weak (12:12). However, God accepts us and educates us. This is the *paideia* of the Lord that begins with the recognition of personal weakness.

The same concept is evident in the story of Jesus' blessing of the children. The kingdom of God belongs to such as little children. "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). Recognition of the little ones, such as children, is the starting point for self-understanding and thus for education. Education in the Christian faith starts with the recognition of the same gospel of the Jesus who welcomed the sick, sinners, women, and children.

The recognition of my own weakness leads to the recognition of the common life. As I am permitted to live by the grace of God, so are my neighbors. In place of *arete*, the common concept of good in the Greek classics, Paul used the word *oikodome* when he spoke about virtue in the church or the community of faith (I Cor. 14). *Oikodome* originally meant to build a house. In some English translations of the New

Testament, the word is translated as edification when it appears as a noun and to edify when it appears in verbal form. The community of faith is nurtured as different persons, alive by the grace of God, live together. Living together is the "virtue" of people who recognize both the love of God and their own weakness.

Hence education in the Christian tradition starts with the recognition of the weakness of the human self and aims at a freely chosen life together, in spite of the weakness of each person. Christian education that begins with the recognition of human weakness represents a different understanding of education from the common educational ideas that emphasize the goal of material prosperity. Christian education helps people find courage to live in spite of a recognition of human weakness.

Based on such an understanding, Christian education must foster freedom, individuality, and life together. Christian education is not meant to domesticate people or indoctrinate them into the Christian faith but to enable people to know that they are free to respond to God's calling. This recognition of freedom provides a foundation for liberation from the social and personal contexts that compel people to live in the present situation as it is.

Therefore Christian education cannot be education by and for control. Neither is it education to domesticate people for total conformity or competition. It must be grounded in individual freedom and must encourage responsible decision making. It must educate people who can recognize individual differences and be motivated to live together without the loss of the uniqueness of the individual. The conformity that is emphasized in Japanese education requires a sacrifice of individuality for the sake of an all-encompassing unity. By contrast, the recognition of the individual puts an emphasis on the differences of each person. Each person can contribute to life

together because of his or her own uniqueness.

THE CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

In what ways might Christian education contribute to the Japanese educational situation? As discussed above, Christian education essentially contradicts the common understanding and practice of education in Japan. This means that Christian education has the possibility of providing a new educational perspective that is lacking in Japanese educational ideas and practices. The very existence and practice of Christian education itself could be a challenge to the educational situation in Japan. It could contribute a new quality or dimension in education to the people in educational settings.

Christian education has contributed a different kind of understanding about being human. As previously mentioned, Christian faith emphasizes the uniqueness and importance of each individual. Christianity has been a major influence in the understanding of individuality in Japan since the sixteenth century. It is no exaggeration to say that Christianity awakened the sense of self in the Japanese spiritual tradition and intellectual world.

In Japanese education, the uniqueness of the individual is emphasized as a principle by many educators and as a pedagogical theory. However, in the actual practice of education, conformity or uniformity is considered to be more important than individuality. As already explained, in the spiritual climate in Japan, individuality has often been assimilated into the uniformity of the nation. Conformity is considered a more superior value than individuality. In such a situation, the recognition of the self remains weak. People tend to find their identity through a sense of dependency on the nation or another group like the company, which they think trustworthy. People think

they can find a meaningful way of life through the prosperity of the nation or the company to which they belong. In turn, the nation or company requires the self-sacrifice of its people for its own ends.

In such a situation, the Japanese sense of individuality or the self is inevitably diluted. Many young people in Japan are suffering in their search for self-identity. The New Nipponism is trying to provide a core of self-identity through the revival of the traditional Japanese ethos and encouraging self-confidence through a Japanese way of thinking. However, such trends tend toward a dangerously exclusive nationalism. The revival of the traditional ethos and way of thinking is not sufficient to compensate for the sense of meaninglessness that many people feel and will not provide a sense of self-identity.

Christianity's recognition of the importance of individuality indicates the necessity for education which centers on the individual person. Christian education questions whether public education is working for or against the individual. It provides an alternative vision of education that differs from the general notion of education aimed at conformity. Christian education can play a role in contributing to the promotion of a sense of self-recognition or self-identity.

Secondly, Christian education questions the methods of educational practice. As detailed above, the transmission of knowledge and indoctrination into the given value system have been considered to be essential emphases in Japanese education. The Japanese educational system is well organized and efficient in this transmission of knowledge and of the given value system.

However, for Christian education, what is important is not transmission but the discernment of new meaning that arises from the interpretation of inherited knowledge and values. It is essential for Christian faith to derive meaning from the Bible and from the

traditions of the church. Christians must interpret the biblical stories and traditions within the contexts in which they live in order to maintain a meaningful faith.

According to the understanding of conscientization by Paulo Freire, education cannot continue as a means of transmitting knowledge and of indoctrination into a particular tradition or doctrine. Education for indoctrination functions to tame or domesticate people in the status quo. Such education is little more than adjustment or adaptation. If we are tamed or domesticated by education, education cannot contribute to change—change in a person, change in the situation or society in which the person lives, or change for the future. Educational practices should make people conscientious about themselves, their situation, and society.

Japanese education strongly emphasizes the transmission of knowledge. However, now is the time when values and ideas once considered to be unalterable are being questioned and shaken from their foundations. Many things are happening in our world that cannot be understood and solved by the given traditions of knowledge, thought, and values. We need education that makes it possible to uncover and create new values and perspectives. One of the important roles of Christian education in Japan should be to clarify and insist that education encourage the awakening of consciousness and the discovery and practice of meaning.

Third, since Christian education is a process of conscientization and the finding and practice of meaning, it necessarily calls into question the relationship between teachers and pupils in current Japanese educational practice. Many educators in Japan see the teacher as the subject of education and the pupil as the object. Teachers must teach, transmit knowledge, and lead immature people to some definite goal. Pupils must study, accept the teacher's knowledge, and obey the teacher's guid-

ance. It is an education that deposits knowledge and a value system for an already determined future. In this sense, education becomes a heavy burden for many pupils. They cannot discover the joy and satisfaction of learning in such a situation. They are dissatisfied and frustrated with this type of education.

In order to find and practice meaning, education requires a reciprocal relationship between the educator and the educatee. Such education should be based on a dialogical relationship between the educator and educatee. Christian education must present a challenge to the current educational practice of one-way transmission from teachers to students by practicing a dialogical method.

As formerly noted, Japanese education is thought to exist as a preparation for the future. This utilitarian view is quite dominant. However, what is important from the perspective of Christian faith is to find meaning that makes it possible to live in a significant way now. Only those who can find meaning in the present are able to discern the way toward a meaningful future. So Christian education questions education that is oriented toward the future.

Since Christian education consists of the intersection of meaning, learning, and lifestyle, it should be involved in the process of finding meaning and discerning how to live together on the basis of that meaning. Thus Christian education is more than a means of evangelism or of teaching people about the content of Christian faith. It provides an alternative vision of education from the perspective of Christian faith. In other words, Christian education provides a new paradigm for the current educational situation in Japanese society. In questioning what is happening in education and modeling a different kind of education, Christian education can provide an alternative educational setting in Japan. Christian education criticizes the thinking and practice of edu-

cation in general and suggests new possibilities for education through this criticism. Christian education has a responsibility to communicate Christian faith in educational contexts.

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