

The Passage Of Death In The Japanese Context In Pursuit Of An Inculturated Lutheran Funeral Rite

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THE RITUALS surrounding the event of death, that is to say “funerary rites,” are no doubt as ancient as civilization itself.¹ The distinguished historian Arnold Toynbee states that “The oldest, most numerous and most imposing relics of our ancestors are funerary” (Toynbee et al. 1969, 59–60). Certainly all cultures throughout history have understood death as an exigent moment in life’s passage, and as such have at least tacitly prescribed ways in which to ritualize the transition. As the social anthropologist Margaret Mead concludes, “I know of no people for whom the fact of death is not critical, and who have no ritual by which to deal with it” (1973, 89–90). It can safely be said, then, that the funeral rite is a universally observed “rite of passage,” something which is enacted and experienced around the globe in virtually every culture.

In the case of Japan, which might well be described as one of the most traditional societies in the twentieth century, the felicitous observance of the funeral rite is a matter of profound importance. Shibata Chizuo (Professor of Practical Theology at Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary) is quick to point out that funerals and the “care of the dead” is one of the most important dimensions of Japanese culture, having a long history and place of honor within that society (Shibata 1993).² It might be said that the greatest and most visceral concern for Japanese is insuring that, at the time of their

passing, someone will take responsibility for carrying out the appropriate funerary rites. Thus, the event of death becomes an occasion where the greatest of care is taken by all to adhere strictly to the rituals involved in the funeral process. Coming to terms with this fact, and finding ways to account for the concerns of Japanese culture, vis-a-vis the celebration of the funeral rite, has been a perennial issue with which the church in Japan has had to grapple.

My own awareness of the centrality of the ritual surrounding the event of death among the Japanese and the subsequent ramifications which this has concerning the question of celebrating Lutheran liturgy in the context of Japanese culture comes as a result of an experience as a guest presider in a Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church parish on the Feast of All Saints in 1985. Much to my surprise, at the completion of the morning service, the wife of the Japanese pastor (for whom I was substituting) informed me that it was now time to proceed to the *nōkotsudō* (columbarium) located on the roof of the church, and conduct the annual memorial rite for the dead! I was not even aware that such a rite existed in the Lutheran Church!

Walking into the small dark columbarium I could see along the sides of the room the rows of shelves which housed the urns containing the cremated ashes and bones of the deceased. After proceeding through the

order of service without any major faux pas, I noticed at the end of the liturgy that some of the church members came and stood before certain urns, pressed their hands together with fingers pointing at a forty-five degree angle and bowed profoundly.

It was clear that these parishioners, as they made their way from one urn to another, were paying their annual respect to the dead, not unlike what often takes place in Japanese culture in front of the family grave at the vernal and autumnal equinox. Here, most assuredly, I was witnessing the relentless march of a sacred ritual exceedingly dear to the Japanese, an observance that was bound to take place, for some, with or without the assistance of the church's liturgy. When the service was over I left the church columbarium with a new, if somewhat baffled, consciousness of Japanese spirituality and its impact upon the church. It was especially as a result of this experience, and my subsequent reflection upon it, that I began to be acutely aware of the centrality and importance of death-related ritual among the Japanese and its influence upon the liturgy of the Lutheran Church in Japan.

Clearly, mortuary custom, with its concomitant household ancestor cult, is one of the most important issues with which the church in Japan must come to terms, if Christianity hopes to take root in Japanese soil.³ In short, developing a successfully inculturated funeral rite is an imperative task for any Christian Church located in the Japanese context.⁴

This essay, then, will examine the newly "inculturated" 1993 Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC) funeral rite set against the backdrop of mortuary custom in contemporary Japanese culture, since this is a necessary preliminary step in gaining an understanding of the significance to the changes in the new 1993 rite.⁵ Ultimately this essay will attempt to analyze and assess how the Lutheran Church in Japan has pursued the issue of inculturating the celebra-

tion of Christian death, vis-a-vis Japanese cultural expectations.⁶

MORTUARY RITES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE CULTURE⁷

It is the contention of this essay that the meaning of the funeral rite in Japanese culture is to be understood not so much as a *rites de passage* which carries the bereaved through transition, though it most assuredly serves this purpose as well, but rather as a constitutive ritual concerning the very foundation upon which Japanese society is built, namely, the identity of the "household" (*ie*).⁸ To put it another way, mortuary rites in Japanese culture are not simply concerned with negotiating the fact of death itself, but are integrally connected to the continuation of the household and the lineage of ancestors; these can only be sustained through the process of celebrating the obligatory linear and cyclical mortuary rites.⁹ It is ultimately through this ritual process of felicitous observance of the obligatory funerary rites and the concomitant ancestor cult that the "household identity," to which the dead and the living belong together, is nurtured and maintained. As professor Ishii explains, "In the concept of *ie* are included not only existing family members but also the spirits of the deceased of the lineage. The worship of the dead was regarded, therefore, as an important task for the continuation of *ie* (family)" (1979, 51).

It should not come as a surprise then to discover that nearly ninety percent of the Japanese population regularly perform *hakamaeri* (visits to the family or ancestral grave) to report important events which have transpired in their lives. As Robert Smith concludes his discussion on "caring for the dead" in Japanese culture, "Death does not...sever the ties between the deceased and the members of his household. A person can expect that in the normal course of things his spirit will continue to

share in the life of his immediate kinsmen..." (Smith, 114). This phenomenon of "caring for the dead" is understood as a means of sustaining the warm, human relationships of this world into the next, and in so doing, keeping the family, as well as the community, intact. Conversely then, as Herman Ooms reports, "People who are thought of as not venerating their ancestors, are believed to have broken with the community" (Ooms 1967, 267).

In short, an examination of the funeral process in Japan reveals the fact that at the core of Japanese culture lies an understanding that the members of the *ie*, even after the event of death, go on living together in an inextricable relationship of interdependence—a concept which Japanese scholars have called, *shisha seija kyōzon*, or the living and the dead existing together (Hashimoto 1975).¹⁰ It is ultimately this concept of "the household of the living and the dead," that both undergirds and dictates the long and complex funerary customs of Japanese culture.

Structural elements which are integral to the Japanese funeral process, and which ultimately have bearing on the "meaning" of the rite, should be noted as follows (especially since these play a significant role in the changes made to the Japanese Lutheran funeral rite): The *indō* (the instructions) given by the priest to the deceased for a successful journey into the afterlife, the *jukai* (giving of commandments), and *okyō* (reading of the Buddhist sutras). The *shōkō* (burning/offering of incense, which normally includes the act of bowing and praying) and *chōji* (the funeral oration/eulogy). The *shōkō*, invariably includes *rei* (bowing) and *gasshō* (praying). These ingredients directly honor the deceased through the incense offering of each individual, and bind the family/clan together through the communal act of eating and drinking together in the presence of the deceased. In

these acts, the household structure and identity is reaffirmed and sustained.

In the final analysis, it must be concluded that mortuary rites in contemporary Japanese culture are not so much a way to "dispose" of the deceased, as they are a way to "transpose" the deceased, from a living member of the household to an ancestral member. Thus, it is in caring for the dead (as witnessed especially in the offering of incense, flowers, and food, in the "direct address" of the deceased, and in the caring for the ashes, mortuary tablet, and grave), even as the dead "care" for the living, that the interdependent relationships of the household are sustained and nurtured through the complex and protracted death-ritualization process.

THE 1993 JAPANESE LUTHERAN FUNERAL RITE

It might well be argued that the new 1993 Japanese Lutheran funeral rite offers, for the first time in the history of Lutheranism in Japan, an inculturated practice of Christian funerary celebration. Ultimately, it attempts without hesitation or apology to provide a fuller, more complete funeral liturgy which fits the particular needs of the Japanese context without simply translating an existing "burial rite" from the Lutheran Church in the United States as done previously.¹¹ The new rite is unabashedly Japanese.

Funerals in Japan are a very serious matter. Without the ability to trust that the funeral process will be observed felicitously, Japanese are unlikely to embrace Christianity. Mr. Kinoshita, a Lutheran parishioner and director of a large funeral establishment in Kurume, Japan, explains the problem: "Japanese feel uneasiness with Christianity's handling of the matter of after-death, and the elderly who pray in Christian facilities while alive, return to Buddhism when they die" (Kinoshita 1993, 17-18).

Kinoshita is not necessarily suggesting that Christians are “converting” back to Buddhism at the time of death. Rather, because of Christianity’s treatment of the “after-death process,” at the time of death many Japanese simply rely on Buddhist funeral traditions. These practices involve, in particular, the cyclical and linear rites which follow the funeral. Kinoshita elaborates, “. . .the problem [with the Christian funeral] is the weakness of what follows after the funeral” (17). In other words, the problem with the Christian funeral in gaining acceptance within Japan lies in the fact that it does not adequately accommodate the expectation within Japanese society for the proper “after care” of the deceased.

A related issue which the Church in Japan faces is not only the question of “what” is done in the funeral process, but also the matter of “for whom” the funeral is held—an issue which arises out of a concern for one’s household and the preservation of the *ie*. The question that often arises in reference to unbaptized members of a household is “what can be done for those who die outside of the faith”? In fact, many Japanese Christians actually find themselves desiring a “Christian” funeral for their family or relatives, even if these relatives are unbaptized (Ushimaru 1993). Could the JELC theologially justify a liturgical practice in which the celebration of a non-baptized person’s funeral would be allowed, or even encouraged? The handling of this problem was to become one of the hallmarks of the new rite.

The new JELC funeral rite responded to this issue by adopting an almost self-conscious stance toward those who were not a part of the church, taking these persons into account and ritually including them in the funeral process. Nowhere is this made more clear than in the radical policy shift that it adopts concerning the use of the funeral rite for the unbaptized. The prefatory rubrics of the new rite unequivocally state, “even for those who are not believers, if it is desired,

it is possible to do this [the funeral] (JELC 1993, 102). The question that must be posed is how this stance was justified by the JELC.

In the midst of preparations for the publication of the new 1993 funeral rite, the argument was made by Rev. Maeda Teichi (former president of the JELC and one of the chief architects of the 1993 rite) that “the question of burying a non-Christian isn’t so much a matter of the deceased’s faith as it is a matter of the faith of us who bury” (Maeda 1993). Thus, when the new rite was published, the practice of using the funeral rite for the unbaptized was justified by simply changing the traditional statement from “the Burial of the Dead is provided for the burial of those who depart this life in the Christian faith,” to “the funeral rite manifests the way to inter in faith a person who has died” (“Order for the Burial of the Dead 1958, 253; “The Funeral Rite and Marriage, 102). In other words, a theological shift was made from understanding “faith” as a requisite condition on the part of the deceased, to understanding Christian burial as an “act of faith” on the part of those doing the burying. In short, it is a shift in focus from the “faith of the deceased in order to inter” to the “act of interring the deceased in faith.”

Another dramatic change in the new funeral rite was the inclusion of nearly all of the traditional rites in the funeral process, placed together in correct chronological order and in one location in its liturgy book, effectively allowing for the multiple-step and protracted nature of funerals in Japan. This can readily be seen in the following comparative chart between the Buddhist rite, the very first JELC funeral rite of 1897, and the new 1993 rite.

As this chart visually demonstrates, the new 1993 rite includes nearly all of the missing elements of the traditional Japanese funeral process. Several significant new elements are included in the JELC rite. Three, in particular, are noteworthy.

THE BUDDHIST RITE	THE 1897 JELC RITE	THE 1993 JELC RITE
At Death (<i>rinju</i>)		Prayer At Death
Pillow Sutra Rite		
Coffin Ritual		Coffin Prayer
Vigil		Vigil-Memorial Rite
Funeral & Farewell	Funeral	Funeral
— <i>indō</i>		— <i>sōsō no kotoba</i>
— <i>chōji</i>		— <i>chōji</i>
— <i>shōkō</i>		— <i>kenkō/kenka</i>
Departure of Coffin		Departure of Coffin
Cremation Rite		Cremation Rite
—gathering of bones		—gathering of bones
Purification Ritual		
Welcoming the Bones		Prayer after Cremation
Seventh Day Rite		Seventh Day Rite
Bones Into Grave Rite (49th day)	Burial [same day as funeral]	Bones Into Grave (50th day)
Death Anniversaries (1, 3, 7, 13, 17, 23, 27, 33)		Death Memorials (1 wk, 1 mo, 50th day, 1, 3, 7, 12, 30, 40th year)
Cyclical Rites:		Cyclical Rites:
— <i>omairi</i> (daily homage)		—(All Saints & Easter)
— <i>higan</i> (9/23, 3/21)		
— <i>oshogatsu</i> (1/1–3)		
— <i>obon</i> (8/13–15)		

First is the inclusion of the *sōsō no kotoba* (funeral send-off words). This is a point in the liturgy where the assembly is invited to stand, in order to emphasize the liturgical unit to follow as a central element in the funeral rite. Rev. Maeda explains the meaning of this liturgical segment: “It is a declaration that we have hope in Christ’s resurrection and can thus commit/return the remains to God” (1993).¹² In fact, this *sōsō no kotoba* corresponds to another key element in the Buddhist rite, the *indō*, a critical juncture in the funeral rite where “words of counsel” are spoken to the deceased by the

priest in order to guide him or her to the after-life.¹³

Second, the seriousness with which the JELC wished to account for and accommodate the protracted nature of the Japanese funeral process is seen in the greater care given to what happens liturgically after the funeral; specifically addressed are the rites of the whole cremation process (from the departure of the coffin from the church to the arrival at home with the urn), and the complete memorial cycle (including interring the bones in the grave) with specific recommended dates for observing the memorial

rites. One of the new rites added to the 1993 liturgy is the *kasōgo no inori* (prayer after cremation). While this ritual has always been an important part of bringing to a close the initial two-to-three day Japanese funeral process (as the urn is brought home or to the church for safekeeping until interment), until now the JELC has never outlined a specific rite to observe this crucial ritual. Ishii captures the sense of the ritual's importance when he states:

Not only is the *kasōgo no inori* important for establishing ongoing pastoral care with the family, but it is also important on a practical level—for helping the family to establish a place and way for keeping the urn (i.e., with a home-altar) during the period leading up to interment (1993).

The memorial rites are significant because, for the first time, the JELC included in the rubrics specific recommendations for when to observe them. Not surprisingly, these concur roughly with the Buddhist cycle. The JELC fiftieth-day rite is in particular proximity to an important Buddhist ritual. In the Buddhist tradition it is on the forty-ninth day that the ashes of the deceased are placed in the grave and the action marked with a special memorial rite. Although the new 1993 rite does not specifically state that it is on the fiftieth day that the ashes should be interred, it does mention the fiftieth day as one of the days for performing the memorial rite; the implication is that this would be the appropriate time at which to perform the *nōkōrsu no inori* (The Funeral Rite and Marriage, 126).

The third and final new element is the allowance for greater flexibility in terms of local ritual customs. The new rite specifically states that “local customs concerning interment, providing that these are not opposed to the teachings of Scripture, may be considered” (102). Needless to say, this allows for much latitude in choosing what will, or will not, be allowed. Two ritual acts

which are specifically included in the funeral rite for the first time, at least on an “official” level, are the *chōji* (funeral oration) and the *kenkō* (incense offering). Both of these have been the subject of debate in the JELC throughout much of its one hundred year history. With the publication of the new 1993 rite, and as a concession to Japanese culture in which these acts are an essential part of the funeral process, they were finally “officially” included, albeit with certain caveats.

The *chōji* is recommended for use at the vigil (but also allowed at the funeral). In either case, however, the rubrics warn that it should be “done in a way that makes clear the fact that its meaning is one of condolence and comfort directed toward the bereaved family” (103). The implication is that the *chōji* is not to be done in the Buddhist manner as a direct address to the deceased for the purpose of offering praise.

The *kenkō* is inserted into the rite, for the first time, at the point where the *kenka* (flower offering) had been officially allowed since the 1968 rite. With the new rite, however, a choice is given between either employing the *kenka* or the *kenkō*. This ritual act corresponds to the Buddhist *shōkō* (incense burning); however, the term *kenkō* was chosen, as opposed to the term *shōkō*, as a way to distinguish the act from what occurs in the Buddhist rite. Seeing the need for caution, lest there be any confusion as to its meaning or association with the Buddhist ritual, the JELC inserted into the rubrics of the 1993 funeral rite instructions that the participants who offer incense (“as a sign of prayer”) are to do so “while in silent meditation praying, ‘God our Father, into your hands I commend this one who has died’” (108). The ritual gestures which accompany this act are not specified. While bowing and doing *gasshō* (pressing one’s palms together in prayer) are the most common gestures at the Buddhist funeral, most Christians will bow but keep their hands

down by their side (i.e., will not engage in *gasshō*) precisely as a way to distinguish what they are doing from the Buddhist ritual (Ishii 1993).

A CONCLUDING ASSESSMENT

What should be apparent at this juncture, having examined the Lutheran funeral rite in Japan, is that even though a common liturgical thread may be present, Lutheran funerals in Japan are nonetheless significantly different from those of the United States. This process of "inculturation" is ultimately inevitable because, as the late Edward Kilmartin explains, the liturgy of the church is always the "culturally conditioned expression of the corporate life of faith" (1990, 49). In short, the Lutheran funeral rite cannot help but be different in Japan than in United States because it is "culturally conditioned" by its place of residence.

What then can be said about the new 1993 JELC funeral rite? What assessment can be made? A discussion of some of the strengths as well as the ambiguities and disappointments of the 1993 rite can begin to address these questions.

To begin, the JELC rite may be said to accord well with Luther's theology of death, namely, that in our encounter with death, God completes what is promised in baptism—the old self is drowned and the new is risen in Christ to eternal life (even as Christ died and rose from the grave). Ishii concurs with this understanding when he analyzes the meaning of the new JELC funeral rite, "The content [of the new rite] is the affirmation of baptism and the anticipation (or 'hope') of the resurrection" (Ishii 1994, 91).

The funeral is also understood, in Lutheran theology, as a way to entrust or commend the deceased into God's care. Here too, the JELC rite echoes this understanding when it expresses the meaning of

the funeral rite: "Those who are left behind, with a faith that entrusts everything into the hands of a God of love, inter the dead, and honor their memory" (Ishii and Shibata 1993, 44). This act of "entrusting" is most clearly exhibited at the *sōsō no kotoba* (funeral send-off words) which comes near the end of the funeral rite and is understood to be the most important and central part of the funeral.

Other areas in the new rite which indicate a positive step toward accounting for the Japanese cultural context involve the inclusion of additional liturgical text and practice to accommodate the various steps of the ritual process of celebrating funerals in Japan, and the inclusion of ritual elements into the funeral rite which corresponds to the Japanese cultural practice of "offering." In the Buddhist funeral rite, this offering takes place primarily at two locations, the *shōkō* (including *rei* and *gasshō*), and the *chōji*. Both these elements, strong and vibrant symbols of Japanese funerary culture, are now officially included in the JELC funeral rite. Whether these, and other customs, flexibly allowed to be expressed in the funeral rite, serve to engender or subvert the Gospel can only be judged over time.

The new JELC funeral rite is not without controversy, especially at the point of allowing for the funeral of the unbaptized. The inclusion of a funeral rite for the unbaptized, with no appreciable difference from the rite for those baptized, must be understood primarily as a response to the perception that Christianity undermines the fabric of Japanese culture. Thus, regardless of the spiritual status of the deceased, the JELC argues that those without faith are able to be buried in the faith of the Church.

The problem with this stance is its enigmatic meaning, both on theological and cultural levels. Theologically, it is problematic in its reference to death as a completion of what is begun in baptism. By ignoring the baptismal faith of the deceased (as well as

baptismal language and baptismal symbols), it quite possibly subverts the central point of Christian burial: that dying in Christ is a completion of the baptismal covenant. This certainly does not agree with Luther's own baptismal spirituality. While the practice of interring the unbaptized is theologically explained by stating that it is really done "for the benefit of the bereaved and not the deceased," in the end, this simply serves to obscure the core theological meaning of the celebration of death.

This theological justification also has the unfortunate effect of creating ambiguities on the cultural level as well. By stating that the funeral rite is primarily for the benefit of the bereaved, the idea of the funeral as a ritual for the deceased is completely lost. Himonya Hajime summarizes this "cultural ambiguity" well when he states:

The worst part of the Christian funeral is that...in ignoring the deceased it ultimately ignores the living. After all, the way we treat the corpse says a lot about what we think of life....We must take into account the deceased. We may not be able to "save" the deceased, but we certainly can "take care" of them, showing them honor and respect, and entrusting them to God's care (Himonya 1993).

Second, there is a certain vagueness with the "after-care" rituals. For example, no clear directives are given for the handling of the urn or the use of a home-altar. While the new JELC rite is to be commended for its inclusion of specific rites for use after the initial funeral stage has been completed, it is not clear about how these are to be used and what exactly they entail.

Furthermore, the tendency to use the funeral rite as an opportunity for evangelism, at the expense of pastoral care, ultimately obscures the purpose of the funeral celebration. While this was especially a problem in the early years of the work of the Lutheran Church in Japan (primarily be-

cause of the overriding concern for "evangelism"), it still presents a dilemma. The temptation for many Lutheran pastors working in Japan, both Japanese and expatriate alike, is to focus on those who are in church for the first time for a funeral rather than give attention to the bereaved family and the deceased. This is especially true of the "funeral sermon," which invariably becomes an "evangelistic message" on the tenets of the Christian faith. Intentions may be honorable, and certainly the presence of a preponderant number of "first-timers" must be acknowledged, nevertheless, when the church uses the funeral as an evangelism service, the ability for "passage" to take place is lost. The bereaved and the deceased are not given the opportunity to properly journey through the stages of "transition." In short, the need for pastoral care is neglected.

Fourth, and last, is the ambiguity which arises in the use of North American Lutheran liturgical material in the JELC funeral rite. Some argue that this serves to veil the Japanese Lutheran Church's unique "cultural" identity. Others argue that it connects them with the universal tradition of the church. To be sure, for many Japanese Christians, "the 'imported' pieces are a badge of Christian identity and a bond with Christians elsewhere" (Brand 1984, 309).¹⁴ They also argue that if North American Lutherans freely "take" their liturgy from the West then there is no reason why Japanese Lutherans should not feel free to do the same. Others, however, argue that the church has failed to grow in Japan precisely because it is too "Western." As Dr. Kanai Shinji (Professor of Modern Religion at Tokyo University) trenchantly argues:

Japanese Christians are trying too hard to achieve a universal brand of Christianity—and of course, universal means Western. Priests and pastors here are too keen to turn their followers into Western-style Christians. As a result, the believers even though they are Japanese, end up

floating about on the surface of Japanese society (Kanai 1992).

In the end, one is left with a sense of "cultural" ambiguity. Are Japanese Christians, as a result of their liturgical choices, "floating about on the surface of Japanese society"? Or, is it possible that over time and with sufficient use, this liturgical material might become a part of the Japanese ethos so completely that it is imbued with a "Japanese" cultural identity?¹⁵

Although the new 1993 JELC has made significant strides toward inculturating the Lutheran funeral rite in the Japanese context, there are, nonetheless, areas which would have to be called "disappointing."

The issue concerning the use of baptismal language and symbol has already been noted. Given the Lutheran theological understanding of death and the purpose of its celebration, it seems that much more baptismal imagery can and should be used in the funeral rite. It may be that this is omitted, at least in part, out of sensitivity to the possibility that the funeral rite may be celebrated for those who are unbaptized.

The best solution for rectifying the ambiguity and disappointment caused by the new rubric in the 1993 rite may be simply to produce two distinct rites: the one for those baptized and the other for special circumstances (including those unbaptized). In this way, it would be possible to employ with lavish abandon reference to baptism and baptismal imagery, such as the use of Romans 6:3-5, which connects so well the imagery of death and baptism (not currently found in the JELC rite); the Apostle's Creed (the traditional baptismal creed of the Early Church); the use of the Paschal candle (the symbol of Christ's resurrection); a Pall (as a symbol of one's baptismal garment) to cover the casket or urn; the sprinkling with water (recalling the deceased's baptism); and the use of white vestments and paraments (which bespeak baptismal new life, as well as ritual purity in Japanese culture).

Briefly, in order to allow the use of this rite for the non-baptized, the full significance of interring those who have died in Christ (including the full use of baptismal imagery) is never adequately observed.

Secondly, the matter of addressing the deceased is problematic. Prayers in the new rite where the deceased is mentioned by name, such as the prayers of "commendation," are more declarative in nature than petitionary. In other words, there seems to be a decided reticence on the part of the JELC to refer to or pray for the deceased. When reference is made, it is done only with great caution, avoiding any semblance of directly addressing the deceased. However, a theological distinction can and should be made between praying "for" the deceased and praying "to" the deceased. It is clear that the Lutheran Confessions indicate that including such prayers are permissible: "We know that the ancients spoke of prayer for the dead. We do not forbid this..." (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, 267). Thus, including such prayers in the Japanese Lutheran funeral rite should not theoretically be a problem. To refrain puts the church in a position where, despite the cultural expectations of the Japanese funeral process, it is unable to fully account for the deceased.

Third, is the matter of celebrating the Eucharist at the funeral. To structure the service in the church around the Mass but then only celebrate the ante-communion (the Liturgy of the Word) lends itself to liturgical ambiguity. Either the funeral should be celebrated as a Eucharist, or it should be structured differently, such as in the form of a Divine Office. Of course, including the celebration of the Eucharist is preferable. This, after all, has a long history in the church, starting with the Early Church practice of celebrating the Eucharist at the funeral and on the anniversary of those "fallen asleep."¹⁶ While reticence to do so on the part of the JELC is certainly under-

standable (stemming from a concern for the fact that the overwhelming majority of those present at funerals are non-Christian and therefore “marginalized” in their exclusion from communion), the celebration of the Eucharist is simply too important to be ignored. One solution may be to wait until the following “Lord’s Day” when the normal gathering of the faithful takes place and, together with the cremated ashes of the deceased (ceremonially placed near the altar), celebrate the Eucharist as a sign of the “communion of saints.”

Fourth and last, is the matter of the cult of ancestors and the linear and cyclical memorial rites. While several aspects of this issue the JELC has handled successfully in the new funeral rite, there are, nonetheless, some aspects which require further attention. According to one survey of Japanese Christians, when asked, “Where are your ancestors?” only 3 percent answered “in heaven,” while 61 percent answered “near by” (Doerner 1977, 158). In another survey, over 75 percent reported that they “daily think of the dead” (Reid 1991, 132). Clearly, even for Japanese Christians, the world is understood and experienced in terms of “the living and the dead existing together,” resulting in a closeness to their ancestors which is not adequately being addressed for in the Church.

The new JELC rite does make an attempt to address this, to an extent, with the inclusion of the new “prayer after cremation” and the linear memorial rites, with suggested dates for use. However, certainly much more can and should be done, without running the risk of turning it into superstitious or idolatrous worship. Some Japanese theologians have argued, for example, that “the idea of ‘the communion of saints’ should be fully exploited as a symbol of the unity we have and experience, through the act of worship, between those who have departed and those still living” (Shibata 1993). This might take the form of a Daily Office (such

as “Morning and Evening Prayer”) which could be prayed as a family in front of the Christian home-altar (housing the bones or “memorial tablets”). At the very least directives should be given for greater use of a cyclical (“ongoing”) pattern of remembering the deceased of the parish at particular celebrations of the Eucharist during the seasons of the liturgical calendar.

In the final analysis what is certain is that the Church in Japan must continue to grapple with these and other related issues concerning the funeral rite and the care of the dead, as it seeks to en flesh the Gospel of Jesus Christ within the context of Japanese culture. This may not necessarily be too difficult a task. As Professor Shibata concludes, “There are many areas concerning the funeral rite in Japan that are *adiaphora* and thus we can do them!” (Ibid.).¹⁷

NOTES

¹ For example, the recent discovery of fossil pollen in Neanderthal graves, in present day Northern Iraq, is suggestive of the fact that homo sapiens had perhaps established a ritual of offering flowers to the dead as far back as 40,000 years ago. See, Cohen 1991, 230.

² For a brief historical account of funerary custom in pre-modern Japan see, Earhart 1982, 25, 41.

³ The Agency for Cultural Affairs in Japan touches on this issue in its statement that, “One of the reasons Christianity is not more generally accepted may be that to the Japanese religious consciousness, with its orientation toward family and household religion and with its almost instinctive inclination to affirm an essential continuity between the divine and the human, as opposed to a religion of individual choice and commitment, Christianity simply seems utterly alien.” See, *Japanese Religion*, 1972, 25.

⁴ The theological imperative for inculturation arises out of the event of the Incarnation itself. As one scholar puts it, “If the Word of God became a Jew, the Church in the various countries of the world must become native to each of them.” See, Chupungco 1982, 87.

⁵ In using the term "inculturation" I mean precisely "the integration of the Christian experience of the local church into the culture of its people, in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of this culture, but becomes a force that animates, orientates and innovates this culture so as to create a new unity and communion, not only in the culture in question but also as an enrichment of the Church universal." See Crollius 1979, 735.

⁶ Although space will not permit an examination of the early JELC funeral rites (published in 1897, 1925, 1949, 1952 and 1968), there is evidence of an uneasiness with the disparity between Lutheran liturgical practice and Japanese funerary custom throughout the Lutheran Church's one hundred year history in Japan. For a thorough treatment of the subject see Luttio 1995.

⁷ The following composite analysis focuses on Buddhist funerary practice, since this is by far the predominant means of ritualizing death in Japanese culture. Current statistics indicate ninety-four percent of all funerals are Buddhist, two percent are Shinto, another two percent are Christian, and two percent are "other."

⁸ The classic work on *rites de passage* theory is, Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites Of Passage*. The three stages involved in every rite of passage are: separation, transition, and incorporation. In Japanese funerary custom, the first stage lasts from death to cremation (usually on the second or third day), the second stage until deposition of the ashes into the grave (usually on the forty-ninth day), and the third stage for as long as thirty-three years until the soul has joined the ranks of the ancestors at the *tomura-ia*ge.

⁹ The cyclical rites are those which occur yearly (at the vernal and autumnal equinox or *higan*, and at the summer festival of *obon*). The linear rites occur at specific points after a person's death, culminating on the thirty-third year when the deceased is said to join the ranks of the ancestors. See Smith, 1974.

¹⁰ Hashimoto argues that Japan must be understood as a culture which "embraces death," as opposed to its "denial" or "defiance." According to Hashimoto, this "embracing of death" happens in Japan precisely because the living and the dead are understood actually to exist together, in an ongoing interdependent relationship.

¹¹ The earlier publications of Japanese Lutheran funeral rites in 1897, 1925, 1949, 1952, and 1968 were all (with partial exception in the 1968 rite) direct

word-for-word translations of Lutheran liturgies from North America.

¹² Up until the 1993 rite, Maeda argues, there was no one single climax to the funeral, and thus its purpose was unclear.

¹³ Ishii concurs, as he writes: "Words of committal" is first [time to be] included. The people who attended the seminar in February, Christians and non-Christians alike, said in their reaction, 'Oh you adopted a kind of *indoh!*' It sounds so, and our intention was so."

¹⁴ Brand argues that these "western" rites should be a "point of departure" rather than a "point of reference" (311).

¹⁵ This is, after all, the way in which much of the so-called "Western Rite Tradition" came into being, assimilating various cultural elements over time. Perhaps the question then is, "How long does it take before it can be claimed as one's own?"

¹⁶ For example, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (c. 250) states, "Come together even in the cemeteries...and offer an acceptable eucharist...on the departures of them that sleep." See, Connolly, 1929, 257.

¹⁷ *Adiaphora* is a Greek word meaning "things indifferent." It is commonly used in the corpus of Lutheran confessional documents to refer to elements in Christian theology or practice which are "not essential to salvation"; thus, their use/disuse is simply left up to local discretion.

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