

When Society Itself is the Tyrant

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WHAT IS "JAPANESE SOCIETY"?¹

ANY DISCUSSION of "Japanese society" needs to distinguish clearly between the image of Japanese society, defined by those who are considered, or who consider themselves to be, authorities in that society, and the society that actually exists on the ground. The former is the society that is defined in the almost infinite number of essays published in Japan on what it means to be "Japanese" (the so-called *Nihonjinron*); the latter is the society one experiences in living in Japan.

It is simple common sense that members of a society will have enough in common to give it coherence. Those in leadership positions stress the need for unity of purpose and understanding, and most people would probably assume that this is part of what it means to be a society. A society without this sort of unity is often viewed as a sick society in danger of disintegration. For this reason any society finds it difficult to deal with elements within it which are different, which do not seem to fit, and in many cases the presence of such elements is simply denied.

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There is always pressure on such elements to either conform or get out.

While this pressure is present in all societies, it is especially strong in Japanese society. In Japanese society, those who consider themselves authorities define in great detail what it means to be a Japanese person. They describe how a Japanese person thinks, what a Japanese person's attitudes are, what a Japanese person likes, what a Japanese person's aesthetic sensitivities are, etc. It follows then that a person who is different in any significant respect is not really a Japanese person. Since these definitions are made by those in positions of authority, it is only natural that these definitions work to the benefit of these same authorities.

These "authorities" are seen at many levels. They are the leaders of small groups in society, often both formal and informal neighborhood associations. They are the people who teach local residents what it means to be "Japanese" in specific situations. Thus, when the Shōwa Emperor (Hirohito) died, they taught their neighbors what "we Japanese" do in this situation.

In the intellectual world the "intelligentsia" fill the bookshelves in bookstores with essays on Japaneseness, describing and defining the Japanese person. The obvious preconception behind all this activity is that there is a basic sameness in the character of all people who are truly Japanese and that, therefore, all truly Japanese people can be fit into one framework; that it is possible to

define a Japanese person in significant detail.

The second special characteristic of Japanese society is that a great many people seem to acquiesce in having their character thus defined, or at least do not resist, and apparently do not feel much unease at having themselves defined by others. This willingness to have one's essential selfhood defined in detail by so-called authorities has always been a source of astonishment and bewilderment to this writer.

Many in Japanese society also see the structure of their society as being part of the natural order. Again, although this belief is also found in other societies, it is especially strong in Japan. For example, former Prime Minister Nakasone is reported to have said, "Japan came into existence as a natural community, *not a nation formed by contract*. Win or lose, the nation remains the nation, and must wipe away disgrace and move in the pursuit of glory."²

In other words, Japan has been this way from the beginning and will never see substantial change. Obviously this sort of belief is convenient for those at the top of the social order since radical change in society would mean the loss of their position. Nakasone had an obvious vested interest in perpetuating this myth.

If Japanese society is "natural," based on racial characteristics of the Japanese people, then social change becomes almost impossible. Birds fly in the air, fish swim in the sea, and Japanese people have this society and culture. In its strongest form this means that if one's ancestors were not Japanese, one can neither become Japanese nor really understand Japanese society and culture, and critiques by those who are not racially Japanese can be ignored. Real understanding is somehow transmitted only genetically.

The following passage from a book by a Japanese psychiatrist presents a radically

different understanding of society, a strong Japanese dissent from the understanding of Japanese society on which the *Nihonjinron* is based. It is written in the form of a dialogue between a psychiatrist and a male high school student. For these two, society is not a part of the natural order, but something that human beings construct.

We tend to think first of the totality and then of individuals as parts of the totality. But really the totality is only an idea in our heads. Only individuals really exist. I think we usually forget this.

—For example?

We think of ourselves as belonging to an organization so that without the organization we don't really exist. We don't seem to realize that without us there would be no organization. Then we think of the organization as some sort of living organism, something that lives and moves. But obviously an organization has no will. Only individual people have wills and feelings. An organization only moves as individuals move. When we speak of an organization's consciousness or activity we're merely giving it a personality. An organization's will is really the will of someone within the organization.

—I see. So an organization really doesn't have goals or ideals.

So, an organization has no goals or ideals. It is only a gathering of individuals who share the same goals and ideals. Yet so often we come to think that it is all right for an individual to be sacrificed for the ideals of the organization. In fact, in the name of the organization we call on people to sacrifice themselves. Not only that, we make the sacrificial victims heroes and try to force others to sacrifice themselves as well. This brings us around to the way in which even the dead have authority and it is now clear that without an organization the dead

would have no compelling authority. In any case, only living human beings have goals and ideals so that it is clear that it is always someone within the organization who calls for sacrifice in the name of the organization.

—Perhaps it is enough to understand that an organization only has goals and ideals in so far as the individuals involved have goals and ideals in common. If we understand this then the organization itself has neither authority nor power. Then no one can force us to listen to an organization. Rather the organization will only be able to move when there is harmony among the wills of individuals.

But, it is important then that each individual be conscious of the fact that this organization is the result of each individual voluntarily participating in the organization and that individuals are not mere units of the organization.³

In contrast, if as Nakasone says, Japanese social structure is part of the natural order, then fundamental change is not possible. We cannot expect a different kind of society in Japan anymore than we can expect fish to learn to fly through the air. If radical change really is impossible, then the really authentic Japanese culture is only that which has been around from the beginning. Newer “modern” things are not really Japanese. Although it seems very strange, it is as if Japanese culture came to an abrupt halt many centuries ago. It is even stranger that many people seem to believe this.

This cultural understanding is apparent, for example, in the attitude of the police, in the way they react to left-wing and right-wing influences. Left-wing ideas came to Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Right-wing forces and gangsters have been in Japan since ancient times. Recently the Hiroshima Higashi Police Sta-

tion displayed a large banner proclaiming all out war on leftist guerrillas. However, while Hiroshima has many right-wing thugs and gangsters who present a real danger to its residents, left-wing guerrillas are few and far between. If the police really wanted to eliminate organized crime, that ought to be possible, but it seems they would rather preserve gangs at an appropriate level. Left-wingers come from the outside and need to be eliminated; right-wingers and gangsters are part of traditional society.

In addition to the myth that sees Japanese culture and society as part of the natural order, there is another myth that sees the thought processes of Japanese people as being fundamentally different from the rest of the human race. Obviously this makes understanding between Japanese people and other human beings extremely difficult. However, this is usually understood to mean that while Japanese people can understand other people quite well, other people are not capable of really understanding things Japanese. Only Japanese people can understand Japanese ways. One writer, Tsunoda Tadanobu,⁴ goes so far as to maintain that Japanese brains are different from those of other human beings so that Japanese people combine logical thought and aesthetic appreciation in the left hemisphere of the brain in a way that is not possible for other human beings.

CHRISTIANS IN JAPAN

What does all of this mean for the church and Christians in Japan? Here one more myth needs to be considered. This is the myth that says when something enters Japan from the outside, its core is radically reconstituted so that it too becomes something very different from what it was, something uniquely Japanese. For example, although science and technology may enter Japan from the West, the ways of thinking

and philosophy, which form their background, are remade into something that may appear Western, but the heart is "Japanese"; that is, it is part of the ancient Japanese tradition.

This myth is a major concern of the Christian novelist Endō Shūsaku and appears as a theme in many of his novels. Probably best known is the following scene from his novel *Silence*. Here, the apostate priest Ferreira tries to persuade the younger priest Rodrigues to give up his faith.

The one thing I know is that our religion does not take root in this country. . . . This country is a swamp. In time you will come to see that for yourself. This country is a more terrible swamp than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves grow yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp. . . . Proud? Yes, if the Japanese had come to believe in the God we taught. But in the churches we built throughout this country the Japanese were not praying to the Christian God. They twisted God to their own way of thinking in a way we can never imagine. If you call that God. . . ." Ferreira lowered his eyes and moved his lips as though something had occurred to him. "No. That is not God. It is like a butterfly, but the next day only the externals, the wings and the trunk are those of a butterfly; it has lost its true reality and has become a skeleton. In Japan our God is just like that butterfly caught in the spider's web: only the exterior form of God remains, but it has already become a skeleton.⁵

It is clear that from the point of view of the self-appointed leaders of Japanese society, the Christian way is not Japanese. Moreover, as Endō Shūsaku obviously fears, by their definition it can never become Japanese

without becoming totally transformed in its essential nature. Therefore, those who attempt to walk in Christ's way are, by definition, not Japanese.

This sort of thinking was clearly operating in the judicial decision handed down in the Nakaya legal case. In that case, Mrs. Nakaya Yasuko sought legal redress when her husband, who died in an accident while a member of Japan's self defense forces, was enshrined in the Yamaguchi Gokoku Shrine (a prefectural Shinto shrine dedicated to the war dead) without her permission and against her expressed wishes. Although Mrs. Nakaya won her case in the lower courts, the state appealed this ruling and the Supreme Court subsequently overturned the earlier verdicts. Mrs. Nakaya was told by the court that, in effect, it was all right for her to be a Christian since freedom of religion is guaranteed by Japan's constitution. However, she was also told that "we Japanese" have our own ways that "you Christians" need to respect and tolerate. *You* Christians must show more tolerance for *our* Japanese ways. In spite of a minority report, in the minds of most of the judges the distinction was clear: we Japanese, you Christians. Somehow it did not seem to occur to them that Mrs. Nakaya could be both Christian and Japanese. In this way, the Gokoku Shrine is Japanese, the Christian church is not. People who worship at shrines are Japanese, people who worship in Christian church buildings are not.⁶

This same distinction is apparent in what has been called town and village Yasukuni thinking. Neighborhood associations collect dues from each household in the community for the maintenance of community activities, often including support for the local Shinto shrine. No one objects if a neighbor does not believe in the Shinto deity or has a different religion. Freedom of religion is fine, provided one does not object to part of one's

dues being used for the local shrine. This is what being tolerant means. All that is required is that one not disturb the local surface consensus and make waves. If one is quiet and does not create a disturbance, there is complete freedom of religion.

A GOSPEL FOR JAPAN?

Unfortunately, a great many Christians in Japan have, along with Endō Shūsaku, accepted the myth that the Christian faith is alien to and incompatible with “real” Japanese society. For this reason they have acquiesced in being considered outsiders in their own society, never allowed to be “real” Japanese. While in many settings Christians are called to be non-resistant, one could wish to see more struggle and resistance at this point.

Because of these myths, Christians in Japan have been afraid to take the gospel and translate it so that it can speak clearly and directly to Japanese people. Many have been afraid that if they would try this the heart of the gospel would be changed into something very different, precisely what those old myths about Japanese uniqueness tell them would happen. They seem to have come to believe that a gospel for Japanese people, or a Christian way for “real” Japanese people, is not possible. They are afraid that if the gospel ever really entered Japanese culture and society, it would be so distorted that it would no longer be gospel for anyone.

It is at this point that we all become victims of these myths about Japanese culture and society. In a sense we are victims of an oppressive atmosphere. When one falls victim to the oppression of a dictator or a government, an identifiable person or group, it is comparatively easy to resist and fight back. When the opponent is a myth or an atmosphere, resistance is much more difficult.

UNIFORMITY OR HARMONY?

Here again the dialogue between the psychiatrist and the high school student has something to offer us. We need to remember that it is flesh and blood human beings who really exist in an objective sense, not social structures and organizations. Social structures and traditions are created by human beings and exist only in human heads. Thus, when someone says, “Japanese people are thus and so,” it is appropriate to ask, “Who says so? What is your evidence?” As human beings we are all too easily misled by an atmosphere. We all need to cultivate a bit more skepticism, a skepticism that will lead us to question the myths about our own society and culture. Christians in Japan need boldness in questioning these myths, a boldness that will enable them to confront even an intimidating atmosphere clothed in the garments of ancient tradition.

The dialogue between the psychiatrist and the high school student has one other important truth for us that concerns our ultimate goals. That dialogue concluded that our ultimate goal is never a kind of unity in which everyone shares a common point of view. Rather, our goal is a society in which people with different points of view can work together in harmony. This is a very different society from that which is traditionally defined for Japan, but it should be obvious that a society that aims at harmony rather than uniformity can never become a tyrant. The goal becomes a pluralistic society where diversity is not only tolerated but encouraged. In such a society there will be many different models of what it means to be Japanese. Society will encourage this. In this society faithful Christians will be recognized as “real” Japanese.

CULTURE AND PERSONALITY

At this point a brief look at cultural anthropology may be helpful. For many years

cultural anthropologists have studied and discussed the relationship between culture, society, and the individual personality. In the early years it was assumed that each individual had a small model of his/her culture within his/her head. It followed that within a particular society all people were essentially the same and one could speak of an American personality or a Korean personality or a Japanese personality. *Nihonjinron* writers have understood the relationship between culture and personality in this way.

However, even a little thought should lead to questions about this way of thinking, and cultural anthropologists discarded this many decades ago. It should be obvious that individuals within a particular cultural setting have many different ways of understanding reality. What is important is not that all see reality in the same way, but that there be ways of achieving mutual understanding. When a certain level of mutual understanding is possible, life together can be mutually satisfactory and rewarding.

CULTURE AND THE BIBLE

It would also be helpful to take a very brief look at how the Bible seems to understand culture. For the people of Israel in the Old Testament, culture and faith were inseparable. Their faith, their political structure, their culture all were based on their covenant with God. For them there was no sacred/secular distinction. For them faithfulness to God meant preserving their own culture. It meant erecting barriers between themselves and their neighbors and living in isolation from them. They believed that building relationships with their neighbors would lead them (the Israelites) away from God. For Israel, God and culture were inseparable.

In the New Testament we meet a totally different way of understanding culture. For the Christian there is no sacred culture, no culture identified with God. Not only has no

culture been received from God, there is no possibility of such. Thus the Christian is free to be open to all peoples. Christians have no Christian culture to preserve. Christians can go out and participate in the cultures of the people among whom they happen to live.

This difference in attitude toward culture is apparent in Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh in Egypt and Paul's confrontation with the Roman Empire. Moses told Pharaoh, "Let us go. We cannot serve God within Egyptian society. We can only serve our God where we are free to build our own distinctive society and culture. There is no way that we can serve our God as Egyptians." Paul's understanding is in stark contrast. Paul maintains that he is quite capable of being a Christian and a Roman, that he can serve Christ as a Roman citizen within the society of the Roman Empire. He can be a real Christian and a real Roman at the same time. Christians have no need to build walls between themselves and their neighbors. In fact, we are forbidden to build such walls.

Obviously Paul is not saying that Christians are to be exactly like everyone else. As Christians we are to be different. But we are not different because we have a different "Christian" culture. No matter what our cultural setting may be, whether we are Romans or Brazilians, or Japanese, we are to serve God. No matter what our culture says, as Christians we serve God. For Christians our culture never becomes the absolute standard by which we live.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS IN JAPAN

But what does this say to us about sharing the gospel within the Japanese cultural setting? Here we have the example of Jesus Christ himself. When God wanted to share God's love with us and bring us the good news, God became a human being just like

us. Not only that, God became a human being as a baby, the weakest, most defenseless form of human life, a human being totally dependent on others. According to Paul in his letter to the Christians at Philippi, Jesus spent his entire adult human life in the status of servant. Jesus lived his life at the bottom of the social hierarchy and shared the good news of God's love with us from that position.

Jesus shared the good news and then told his followers, "Share the gospel. As the Father sent me, so I send you." For that reason it is imperative that we share the good news as Jesus did, from a position of social powerlessness, going to people where they are, never sharing from a position above them. This was Jesus' way of carrying out his mission and his mission is now our mission. There is no other way of sharing God's love.

It is clear from church history that the church has generally been careful about the content of the good news, concerned to get the words just right and to share them accurately. At the same time, the church has tended to handle the way of sharing, how the good news is to be shared, as if this could be decided in a totally utilitarian, pragmatic manner. Anything that seems to work, to reach the most people with the least expenditure of time, effort, and money is assumed to be all right. It is as if the church were planning a television commercial. Effectiveness and efficiency have the highest priority.

However, it should be obvious that if God had been concerned about efficiency, God would never have sent Jesus in the way that he was sent. Jesus worked very hard and endured much in order to share with a very small percentage of the people living on earth at that time. If God really is all knowing and all powerful, there must have been more effective ways of reaching a great many more people. But God knew that love cannot be shared from a position of power.

When we try to share from a position of power, love becomes not love, but a string of new religious obligations. Japanese society already has these in abundance.

JESUS' NEW COMMUNITY

In a society where the society itself is the tyrant, good news must come from a society, from a community, which demonstrates an alternative, a community based on Jesus' way of social powerlessness.

Jesus began his own mission with the announcement, "The right time has come, the Kingdom of God is near." (Mark 1:15) That is, in Jesus and his followers the society of people living under God's rule is becoming manifest. This is the society described by the prophet Micah (4:1-4) in which people live together in mutual love and support, old enmities have been reconciled and all have what they need.

Jesus' body, the church, is to be the foretaste of the kingdom of God, an open community of love and sharing, a community that looks forward to the day when God's kingdom will come. Our specific question in Japan then becomes, "What can we do, concretely and specifically, to help this new shalom community come into being in the midst of Japanese society?" As a concrete example, I suggest that we look at the fellowship of Mennonite Christians in Hiroshima.

HIROSHIMA

Hiroshima, until August 6, 1945, was an important center for carrying on Japan's war in Asia, and the vast majority of its citizens lived from war-related industries. Many in Hiroshima are still proud of that history, and in Hiroshima it is politically incorrect to criticize Japan's fifteen-year war in Asia.

In religion, the Hiroshima area is well known for the strength of Jōdo Shinshū (Pure Land) Buddhism, and for many residents

this is a faith to live by, in contrast to the nominal affiliation common in many areas of Japan. However, Hiroshima shares with other urban areas problems of lostness and alienation as people have moved from the countryside to the city.

Hiroshima is, of course, best known because of the atomic bomb, an experience that has led to a unique devotion to peace and to the elimination of nuclear weapons. Because of this experience, it is comparatively easy to enter into discussions with residents about the meaning of human life. There is also a very strong feeling that the people of Hiroshima are uniquely victims of war in a way that others can never fully comprehend.

The Mennonite Church in Hiroshima

Mennonite Christians have insisted since the sixteenth century that Jesus really intended his followers to live on this planet quite literally following his instructions about loving enemies and not killing people. Thus, when Japanese Mennonites began thinking about moving out of rural Kyushu and planting churches in larger cities, Hiroshima, the city uniquely committed to peace, became a logical candidate.

Personal efforts in Hiroshima

Believing that the church is a group of disciples, we, from the beginning, tried to emphasize that we are all active worker-disciples together, not a group of a few performers and an audience. We tried to make clear that there is no place in the church for so-called ordinary lay people who are essentially passive. Thus, from the time that the first people were baptized, we tried to do all our church planning together and included all church members in all decision making. We wanted to be very sure that everyone realized that all Christians are Jesus' disciples.

We also tried to follow Jesus' instructions

that people who were committing themselves to being Jesus' disciples be taught all the things that Jesus had commanded. We believed that all of these things, including Jesus' way of peace, were integral parts of the gospel.

We not only believed that the church being born in Hiroshima was a church of Jesus' disciples, we also believed that the organization and structure of the church, the life of the church, needed to be a direct response to the needs of people in Hiroshima. That is, Christians in Hiroshima were not to be forced into a framework that someone had brought from somewhere else.

The structure and organization of the church must be a structure and organization that encourages and facilitates the service and activity of church members as disciples of Jesus Christ, not laying burdens on church members, but liberating each member to help other members and to function freely as a disciple.

In our third year in Hiroshima a young man graduated from seminary and was called to leadership in the small Hiroshima church while working as an employee of a local church-related women's college. As leader, he has worked to develop concrete ways in which this small Hiroshima church can help to build shalom in Hiroshima and to contribute to world peace. For example, there are many things in the Hiroshima area related to war and peace that we have used as study projects in the church. He has called on the conference of which we are a part to come together and to study peace during August each year. He has helped the church become more aware of needs around the world through support of a foster child in Colombia and by helping in a church building project in Recife, Brazil. He has worked to draw together people with similar concerns in Hiroshima and has encouraged us in working together.

At the same time, we have also tried to be aware of those things that limit the growth of the church in Japan and to guard against them. Specifically, we have been aware of organizational, economic, and physical barriers to church development. For example, it is common for a congregation in Japan to reach the limits that its meeting place can easily accommodate or the number of people that one person can readily pastor, and at that point to stop sharing the good news with new people. In Japan this has meant that many congregations stop thinking about sharing the good news with new people in an organized way when they have forty or fifty members.

Many urban congregations become so preoccupied with paying for a building and a pastor that all of their efforts are focused on fund raising. They work so hard on these things that members lose sight of the real mission of Jesus' disciples. Instead of working for shalom, the preservation of the church becomes the central focus of their church life. For this reason the Hiroshima congregation has never owned real estate, although we have often talked about it and thought it would be nice to have a building. Because we have no building for people to see, we also have no people just dropping in for meetings if they happen to see the building or a sign announcing a meeting. As a church we only meet new people through the natural relationships of people who are already members—relatives, friends, fellow workers, people who share common interest, etc. However, these are also precisely the relationships that are valued in Japanese society. Most people who have become Christian in Japan first became interested in the Christian faith because someone to whom they were closely related was a Christian.

Most of our congregational gatherings are home meetings. Almost all of our church

members have opened their homes for some sort of regular meeting. They invite friends and relatives and attempt to show the love of Christ concretely within the fellowship of Christians. In this way, the growth of the church is not limited to the relationships open to a pastor or missionary, but is open to the almost infinite relationships of those who have become disciples.

Obviously this is not the whole story. None of us can sit back, content with our present relationships and let nature take its course. Each of us is called to go out, to hunt for and extend hands of love to those in trouble, to the weak, to the lonely, to those seeking help. All of us are called to be open to new opportunities and to look for new ways of meeting new people.

Equally obviously, this manner of church formation has serious dangers. In its early years it is very slow. It may take many years to gain momentum. During these early years, since there is no building, nothing for people to see and with which to identify, it is quite possible for a serious blow or tragedy to sweep everything away and leave nothing. Or, even if everything is not swept away, it is equally possible for an initial small group to become satisfied with itself and to lose the vision for going out and making disciples. Then as this small group becomes older and people die or are transferred to other areas, the church itself will disappear, a bit at a time.

However, there are also possibilities for limitless growth. There is the very great possibility that these disciples of Jesus will take his word seriously and fulfill their mission as disciples in Hiroshima. There is the possibility that these disciples of Jesus will work for shalom and themselves become shalom in Hiroshima, that Hiroshima society will be changed, and that in thirty or forty years there will be many more disciples of Jesus in Hiroshima. This is our hope and our dream,

the hope and dream toward which we want to strive with brothers and sisters in the church, so that the love of Christ may be made manifest to the people of this city in concrete ways, so that all may see that Jesus' way really is love and peace, good news indeed for everyone.

NOTES

¹ For the title of this essay as well as stimulation for some of its ideas, I am indebted to Higuchi Yoichi, "When society itself is the tyrant," *Japan Quarterly* 34/5 (October/December 1988), pp. 350-56. The contents of this article were first presented in two lectures given at the Tokyo Mission Research Institute, Tokyo Biblical Seminary, in February 1990.

² Quoted in Higuchi, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

³ Tada Inada, *Ken'i to Kenryoku* [Authority and power] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1974), pp. 214-16. [my translation]

⁴ Tsunoda Tadanobu, *Nihonjin no nō* [The Japanese brain] (Tokyo: Taishūkan Shoten, 1978). For an English summary see "The left cerebral hemisphere of the brain and the Japanese language," *Japan Foundation Newsletter* 4-5 (1978).

⁵ Endō Shūsaku, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston, (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969), pp. 236-40.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the social context of Mrs. Nakaya's legal battle and its aftermath, see Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: a Portrait of Japan at Century's End*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991); and Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868-1988*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 153-57.