

Some Pastoral Considerations Regarding Contextual Theology in Japan

Introduction

The contextualization of theology is one of the main issues facing the Japanese Church at present. Due to insufficient understanding of the Japanese reality on the side of the Church, there is a gap existing between the Church and Japanese society. Therefore, in spite of the long history of Christianity which was introduced during the fifteenth century and interrupted by a 250-year period of national isolation and also regardless of the freedom existing during the post-war period, the Church is not yet deeply rooted into Japanese soil and into the hearts of the Japanese people. Consequently, the general image of the Japanese Church is still that of a Western one.

I. Challenges and questions posed to us by Japanese society and her people

A. Discoveries of the seeds of the Word of God within Japanese culture and society

We have to become familiar with our national and religious traditions and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden therein. Up till now, in Christian formation, we have neglected to learn about our own traditions and culture and have

simply used a translated catechism. Henceforth, we have to learn through sincere and patient dialogue with non-Christians what treasures our bountiful God has bestowed upon the Japanese people for a long time. At the same time, we have to try to illumine these treasures under the light of the Gospel.¹

B. The creation of a Japanese spirituality, liturgy and theology based on Japanese culture and traditions

Today we cannot remain at the stage of adaptation and imitation of Western Christianity but must become more creative in terms of a contextual theology. "One of the characteristics of the Japanese language is to be able to project man's experience in its immediate and unanalyzed form."² Consequently we cannot communicate the full meaning of the Gospel by using a system of formal logic or through the use of translated concepts borrowed from the Western way of thinking.

For the Japanese people, nature is a mystery of harmonious existence, something we cannot separate from our daily life. In other words, we are used to living in, through, and with nature, seeking consolation in nature. Kenko, a famous poet-critic who lived at the end of the Kamakura period (1283-1350 AD), clearly expressed this inclination: "In many cases it is helpful to gaze at the moon... for whatever suits the particular occasion touches the feeling most... will not our hearts therefore be cheered by a lonely ramble in places far from humanity where weeds grow in pure water?"³

"A theology of nature" is necessary for the Japanese people so that we can explain the mighty power of the Creator as well as the immanence of the divinity in nature. Here we cannot forget that there is a feeling of impermanency (*mujokan*) which is the underlying philosophy of Japanese life. "Life is like the moon covered by a cloud and flowers scattered by the wind." The Budd-

¹ "Ad Gentes", no. 11.

² Kishimoto Hideo, "Some Japanese Cultural Traits and Religions" in *The Japanese Mind*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo), p. 110.

³ William M. Porter, Trans., *The Miscellany of a Japanese Priest* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1914), p. 24.

hist concept of the unity of nature and man has permeated Japanese thought. When asked about his view of life, Takahama Kyoshi, a haiku poet (1874-1959 AD), said, "Nature is an essential force which actuates every entity, including every social phenomenon... Man's life coincides with the movements of nature and heavenly bodies, as flowers bloom and leaves scatter. It is animated along with cosmic phenomena and is annihilated with them."⁴ We have made great use of natural symbols in literature and the visual arts. One of the reasons for this seems to have been the perception of nature and life as one and the same, and the ascription of unhappiness and misfortune to the transiency and evanescence of nature and things impermanent.⁵

Aesthetic and religious values are regarded as being closely related in the Japanese cultural tradition. Religious values and aesthetic values are not two different things, but are ultimately one. Japanese religions, especially Buddhism, instruct man how to reach a tranquil and balanced state of mind. Then man can see things just as they are. The emphasis on such a mental attitude on the part of religion makes its relationship to aesthetics very close. Consequently, the mind of the artist also must be trained by religious exercises. This will explain why so many artists undergo Zen training and why so many Zen monks become master artists.⁶

This aesthetic tendency of the Japanese people requires the creation of a "theology of beauty." We need deeper reflection on the relationship between grace and beauty in creatures. In Japanese society it has been regarded as a highly desired virtue to be able to keep the mind tranquil and calm. This is mainly the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism which have also helped to encourage people to subdue their emotional excitement. The emphasis on a balanced and tranquil state of mind has cultivated the peculiar ability to meet difficult situations. With this trait, we can mention the contemplative characteristic of the Japanese people. We are more inclined to see reality introspectively or intuitively rather than rationally. Verbal expression therefore

⁴ Takahama Kyoshi in *Watakushi no Tetsugaku* (My Philosophy), Tokyo, 1950.

⁵ Minami Hiroshi, *Psychology of the Japanese People* (Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1971), pp. 56-57.

⁶ Kishimoto, op. cit., pp. 117-118.

will become less powerful than silence. Based upon this, we will be able to create a "theology of silence and intuition."

Since language is a basic transmitter of cultures and tradition, we have to theologize in the Japanese language in order to express our faith experience in the Japanese way of thinking.

C. An evangelical transformation of Japanese society

"Japanese group organizations reveal the vertical structural principle, the core of which is to be found in the basic social relationship between two individuals. This structural tendency, developing in the course of the history of the Japanese people, has become one of the characteristics of Japanese culture."⁷ Our task is to bring about an internal transformation in the Japanese through the power of the Gospel. But first we have to find out the persistent factors underlying various social changes. "The informal system, the driving force of Japanese activities, is a native Japanese brew, steeped in a unique characteristic of Japanese culture. In the course of modernization, Japan imported many western cultural elements, but these were and are always partial and segmentary and are never in the form of an operating system.... (Although) the outlook of Japanese society has suffered drastic changes over the past hundred years, the basic social grammar has hardly been affected.... This structural persistence manifests one of the distinctive characteristics of a homogeneous society built on a vertical organizational principle."⁸

We also have to be aware of Japanese society from the point of view of structural analyses. Judging from her economic system, Japan is a highly industrialized country. The control of the economy is in the hands of big companies and financing institutions, with many other industries tied to these few giants as subsidiaries. Small independent businesses have difficulty in surviving and as many as 1,000 small businesses go bankrupt monthly. The economy, therefore, is becoming more and more centralized, and high

⁷ Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society* (Penguin Book, 1977), p. 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

standards of living coupled with high industrial output make Japan a consumer society. Mass media strongly reinforces and encourages consumption.⁹ A materialistic life-style has been prevailing all over Japan including the rural areas.

In the social system, factors that affect social standing are money, educational background, type of employment (occupation) and ancestry. The top and bottom sectors of society represent only a small percentage of the population, the top corresponding with the economic giants and the bottom strata largely to groups who through historical circumstances do not participate as equals in the society. Within the middle 90% of society, there is a great deal of competition based on the factors mentioned above as affecting social standing, among these education and the educational system being especially determining factors.

In the political system, the form of government is democratic but in practice it can be said that politics exists mainly for the benefit of the political party in power and industrial giants. Consequently there is a close correspondence and connection between politics and economics.¹⁰

Japanese society needs to be transformed through the power of the Gospel. We as Church are being challenged to work for and to collaborate with others in the cause of justice and equality in economic affairs and social life. The Japanese people are not seeking merely material progress and prosperity but a promotion of their human dignity and brotherly union which will be fulfilled only through Christ's salvific power.¹¹

II. Present situation of the Japanese Church

A. Gap between Japanese society and the Church

One of the fixed ideas held by Japanese society regarding the Church is that Christianity is the religion of foreign countries. Although the teachings of Christ are considered to be admirable,

⁹ Edward Gerlock, *Summary-Interpretation of Group Analyses of Japanese Society* (The results of the Social Structural Analyses Workshop, August, 1977, Atami).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Ad Gentes", no. 12; "Apostolicam Actuositatem", no. 5.

to become a Christian seems to be another thing because Christian life does not seem to fit into the Japanese way of life. The Church is often a ghetto which is irrelevant to the common people, and the teachings of the Church are still difficult to understand because of a decidedly western outlook.¹²

On the side of the Church, there are also many defects which cause the gap. Not going beyond the stage of adaptation or imitation of western Christianity she is often Church-centered and introverted, separating herself from society. There is a lack of social awareness or social responsibility due to a narrow-minded mentality which has been keeping the Church silent regarding social problems and issues of Japanese society such as pollution, the distortion of the educational system, corruption in the economic and political system and social discrimination.¹³

B. Discontinuity in Japanese Christian Life (the problem of separation between faith and life)

Christian formation has been based mainly upon intellectual training with a stress on moral obligations as presented in western catechisms. Consequently, many Japanese Catholics feel that faith is something added to their daily life, resulting in the separation of faith from their lives. Sometimes the Christian faith for them means only going to Mass on Sundays. Christian formation, which has not been based upon their personal life experiences, prayer and the study of the Word of God, has not been adequate to transform their whole life to Christ. From the pastoral point of view, we are aware of the need of an on-going Christian formation especially after Baptism which is often considered by pastors and many lay people as a kind of graduation in Christian formation. Consequently for one third of the baptized, faith may be irrelevant except for weddings and funerals. Sunday Mass, annual retreats, and some activities such as those provided through the Legion of Mary, volunteer work, money donations are not enough to deepen the

¹² cf. Suzuki Noritake and Joseph J. Spae, *Christianity Seen Through Japanese Eyes* (Oriens Institute for Religious Research, 1968, Tokyo); *A Survey About Christianity in Japan* conducted by Japan Market Research Bureau (Tokyo, March 1977).

¹³ cf. *A National Survey on Missionary and Pastoral Problems* conducted by The Japan Missionary and Pastoral Centre (Tokyo, June 1977).

Christian faith of many nor to enable them to commit themselves wholeheartedly and unswervingly to Christ.

C. Some examples of theological contextualization

In attempting to express faith experiences according to the Japanese sensibilities, Father Inoue Yoji has contributed to some extent in shifting away from western theology.¹⁴ Father Okumura Ichiro O.C.D. has been theologizing on Japanese spirituality by trying to express the Christian message through the medium of Japanese Zen spirituality.¹⁵ Father Enomiya S.J. and Father Kadowaki S.J. have been practicing Zen in order to integrate Christian spirituality into Zen spirituality.¹⁶ Father Oshida Shigeto O.P. is experimenting with a Japanese style of religious community-life in the rural areas. He has continued to animate and direct people in a type of community life based on the Gospels and Japanese spirituality, especially that of Zen so that men and women gathered around him can create a new type of religious life which is not imported from Western Christianity. Being self-supporting through farming, they share intimately with the villagers and in their lives.

D. Spiritual renewal at the grass roots level

In the present situation of the Church, one of the felt needs of the people at the grass roots level is the desire for genuine faith experience. Because of this spiritual thirst, many people have been participating in prayer meetings or in groups where there is sharing on the Word of God. Such people have been patiently and seriously studying the Bible for many years. Dissatisfied with the

¹⁴ Father Inoue's main publications (in Japanese) "The Spiritual Soil and an Introduction to Christianity" in *The Japanese Climate and Christianity*, (Tokyo, 1965); *Japan and the Face of Jesus* (Tokyo, 1976); "Evangelization of Japan" in *Catechetical Education* IV, 1978.

¹⁵ Father Okumura's main publication (in Japanese) *Prayer: "Theological Notes;" "Indigenization of Christianity;"* (in French) *Le Zen Depassement, Presence et Liberte* (Carmel, 1970 IV).

¹⁶ Father Enomiya Lassale's main publications: *Zen Meditation for Christians* (Open Court, La Salle, Illinois 1974); *Meditation Als Weg Zur Gotteserfahrung* (Bachem, Koln, 1972); Father Kadowaki's publications (in Japanese) *Twelve Chapters on Dialogue: Ascetic Practices — A Dialogue with Zen*.

formal prayers and liturgy offered in the parish churches, they feel that the present parish structure cannot meet their spiritual needs.

Many people are aware that Church activities have to be nourished by deeper spiritual experiences. Some have become involved in social action, such as the campaign against pollution and social discrimination, taking care of the poor, the unemployed and social dropouts, such as alcoholics.

III. Future Perspective of the Japanese Church

A. Community-building centered on the experience of faith

Within and beyond the existing ecclesial structures, we have to build up smaller communities where people can deepen their faith, share with others and experience fraternal communion by being nourished through prayer, the Word of God and the Bread of Life. This community will be *prophetic* by proclaiming the Good News and denouncing whatever is against the Kingdom of God. Ongoing Christian formation is necessary through serious and continuous study of the Bible as well as through reflecting on the Word in their lives. Personal and communal prayer are very important elements in building up a community which enables the members to experience "metanoia" daily.

The community will be *eucharistic* by celebrating its life experiences in the light of Christ's saving action. The eucharistic celebration should integrate all activities and events into praise and thanksgiving to God-the-Father. Because of the innate characteristics of the Japanese people to grasp reality as "one" rather than to analyse and separate or make distinctions, through such communal experiences, we can help to create internal unity. Such group atmosphere will help the members to integrate the various factors of their lives into an existential experience of divine grace. Also through a life which is in harmony with nature, we can praise and give thanks to God-the-Creator.

This community, however, should become ministerial by participating in the ministry of the Church. Strengthened spiritually,

the community reaches out to serve especially the poor and the oppressed within Japanese society. Expressing Christian love concretely through actions, we need to animate people so that even non-Christians are enabled to participate in Christ's ministry in and for society. Doing social welfare work has become very common and accepted in Japan for the past ten years; the Christian community, therefore, has to become the animator of such movements.

The building of basic Christian communities in the Japanese context will be one of the main issues in the future. We often hear that the Japanese people are not used to sharing and expressing themselves in a group, but we also are convinced of the liberating power of the Holy Spirit which can open up our hearts. Faith formation is not a matter of human ability, but is truly a wonderful work of grace.

Naturally speaking, the Japanese people like to get together and to belong to a group. This tendency, of course, may become a shortcoming if we neglect to develop the personality of the individual. However it is possible to build up a genuine Christian community gathered around the Risen Lord which will also foster personal growth and develop the awareness of the individual to assume responsibility. Hopefully, this basic Christian community will become a reality and the basis of renewal within the Church in Japan. At the same time, we are very much aware of the difficulties which may arise from an old mentality which fears change as well as from over-structured institutions of the Japanese Church.

B. The building up of a truly local Church

Creative dialogue and encounter of Christian spirituality with Japanese spirituality will be one of the main factors in building up the local Church in Japan. If the message of the Gospel could become incarnated within the Japanese spiritual soil and the lives of the people, the Church will become truly Japanese. "Economia incarnationis," therefore, is a basic principle in the building up of a local Church.¹⁷ We have to build the Japanese Church "in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions,

¹⁷ cf. "Ad Gentes" no. 22; Joseph Sasaki "From the Adaptation Principle to the Incarnation Principle" in *The Missionary Bulletin* June 1978.

the cultures, the religions — in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.”¹⁸

If we could discover the seeds of the Word of God in Japanese culture especially in Japanese literature which contains the core of any transmitted culture, we can re-interpret the message of the Gospel and express it in the Japanese way. The Japanese mentality with its inclination to nature, the intuitive and contemplative tendency, the existential insight into life-reality will be the spiritual soil into which the Word of God should become deeply incarnated.

A Japanese-type of leadership emerging from close inter-personal relationships will respect the atmosphere and feelings of the community rather than its rationale.¹⁹ This leadership will animate the charisms of the members of the Church, so that the laity can fully develop their charism in their daily lives. This means also that in the future Church there will be more lay leaders who can coordinate and keep unity within the community. Consequently the local Church will depend very much on lay leaders who will exercise fully their ministries. The priestly function will assume its original spiritual character: to be the core of unity within the community, a spiritual leadership that animates it rather than dominates it.

This local Church of Japan will change her attitude towards other Asian local churches by fraternal sharing and exchange so that she will become more open to the Universal Church. One of the important aspects of fraternal sharing will be the mutual sharing of sorrows, sufferings and pains of the Asian Churches as well as their aspiration and joys. This openness to the wider world of Asia and its local churches is a crucial necessity. It will liberate the Japanese Church from introversion and make it go beyond the narrow boundaries of Japanese-ness.

¹⁸ “Final Statement of the Assembly” no. 12, *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia* (FAFC, 22-27, April 1974 Taipei).

¹⁹ Nakane, *Japanese Society*, op. cit., pp. 73, 79. “... the qualification of the leader in Japanese society depends upon his ability to understand and attract his men.”; “The leader’s *raison d’être* is... to serve as a pivot for human relations and keep the peace.”

C. A Church transforming Japanese society through "diakonia" especially with regard to the "little and poor"

First of all, the Japanese Church has to become poor in spirit by doing away with authoritarianism, clericalism, intellectualism and her bourgeois outlook. By becoming more evangelical, the Church will be able to transform Japanese society as "the salt of the earth and the light of the world." (Matt. 5, 13-14) For this purpose, the Church should not extend her earthly power, but rather empty herself through humble service to society. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit." (Jn. 12, 24) Instead of trying to conserve herself, the Church should give herself generously to "diakonia" which will eventually inspire non-Christians to participate in the same ministry of Christ. The transformation of society bringing about structural changes will be effected by a new power emerging from the grass roots. In order to bring this about, the Church needs to conscientize people on the grass roots enabling them to change the social order from below.²⁰

Conclusion

The creation and development of a contextual theology in Japan will depend on the actualization and the depth of the incarnation of the Word of God in the hearts and lives of the people as well as in the living traditions and culture. This will be a dynamic encounter and dialogue between the living message of Christ and the Japanese total reality. At the same time, this can be done only through an actual and deep experience of the Holy Spirit who transforms all creatures and the whole universe. We therefore have to become more docile and sensitive to the workings of the Spirit of Christ who is evangelizing our total being so that we can bear witness to God's love within the Japanese context.²¹

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²⁰ "Final Statement of the Assembly" op. cit. no. 19-24.

²¹ cf. Joseph Sasaki "The Future-Oriented Church of Japan: Its Image and Vision," in the *Japan Missionary Bulletin*, March 1978.