

Japanese Challenges: Buddhism, Shintoism and Others

Introduction

I was a Buddhist and a Shintoist before I became a Christian. Just like my case, we Japanese embrace two religions at the same time. So I was the typical Japanese. In my papers I am not about to clarify what is the Buddhist or Shintoism in such a short time. But from the evangelization point of view, I will make clear how to reach the Buddhists and Shintoists.

1. Difficulty of proselytizing Japanese

Generally speaking, people of Turkey are one of the most modernized Muslim countries which has been challenged to join the EU. So, seemingly, they are so easy to be evangelized. But actually it is very difficult to proselytize them.

Why so difficult? Some specialists of the Muslim evangelization answered me that for the people of Turkey to leave Islam means to stop being Turkish. They are so proud to be Turkish. Very similar to it, ostensibly Japanese are so easy to be Christians, but in fact very difficult to win the souls of them.

Last year (2009) the Japanese Protestant church celebrated its 150 year anniversary, but Christians number less than 1%, obviously not to be compared with South Korea or China.

2. The reasons for the difficulty

We must know that it is not because of the quality of Japanese pastors or missionaries. Because even though at present, high quality missionaries from many foreign countries are working in Japan, who if they do their ministries in their mother lands, surely they can establish big churches, but in Japan, they can not save many Japanese, rather they suffer in their ministries. For example: a missionary who succeeded in saving countless people and established a big church in south Asia, came to Japan, but he could not win many souls and went back to his home with big disappointment. And it is not because of the methodology of evangelization as well. At present, in Japan there are so many “church growth seminaries,” “cell group studies,” etc. The more days, the more methodologies have come up. But still Christians number less than 1%. Of course some denominations go up in number, some down, but totally it has not changed significantly.

As I have proven above, the reasons why Japanese Christians number so few are not because of the quality of the Christian workers or the methodologies of the evangelization. If so, what is the reason?

The reason is the Japanese themselves, that is, Japanese mentality. Some anthropologists say that Chinese and Koreans resemble more closely Europeans than Japanese in mentality, because Chinese and Koreans make more of the truth or principle than human relationships, but the Japanese make more of the human relationship than truth or principle.

It is a very precise and important observation, some enquête <French> (a kind of a public opinion poll) prove it. For example: NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai) chose 1000 people at random and did enquête of religion. Christianity reached the highest point (36%). And once again NHK did enquête choosing only very common and ordinary Japanese, excluding extreme ones, such as political left wing members, etc. Surprisingly as much as 70% of them chose Christianity as the most desirable religion.

Thus, Japanese people are aware that Christianity is the best religion. If so, why Japanese people do not come to church? Because they are afraid of disturbing human relationships of their families or neighborhood even though they know that that Christianity is the best. Thus Japanese make much of

human relationship more than the truth. Consequently we can say that as for Japanese, one of the most important things is harmony; in Japanese “Wa.”

3. Japanese Buddhism

If that is the case, we wonder what has been making such Japanese mentality, and spontaneously we come to think of Buddhism. But at the same time we know that same Buddhism has made different mentalities in Korea and China. Thus we have to think about Japanese Buddhism.

In this essay we have no time to use a surgical knife to investigate the complicated Buddhism in detail. Anyway as every educated Japanese knows, a figure who had contributed for the magnification of Buddhism in Japan was Shōtokutaishi. (AD 574 - 622)

He emphasized so much “Wa” (harmony) as this spirit has infected the heart of Japanese so deeply and so long up to now. Consequently those who harm the harmony are bad, whether they are right or not has been beside the question.

We can see the tendency in all spheres of Japanese society, even in Christendom. For example, the Japan Evangelical Missionary Association (JEMA), which consists of about 2000 missionaries working in Japan, has been able to have interdenominational fellowship beyond the barrier between the evangelical and charismatic. But in the Japanese church there is still a big wall between them. If some pastors who belong to evangelicals try to penetrate the wall, they would be branded as abominable, disturbing the harmony.

Of course, everywhere there are some who seek the truth, but the majority of Japanese make more of human relationships than truth as the anthropologists say, which hinders many Japanese from coming to the Gospel. Unlike Japanese, however, the Chinese and Koreans make more of the truth than human relationships. Thus there are many Christians in both China and Korea, since Christianity is the truth.

1982, when I launched “The living water project” through which one million Bibles would be sent to the house churches in China, pastor Jiro Fukui, who had been in China as a missionary before the world war, was so happy and encouraged us saying, “Chinese people make much of the truth.” But at first stage I could not understand the real meaning of it. Gradually, however, I have understood Fukui’s claim.

When the Chinese have been challenged to choose the truth or the human relationship, they choose the truth sacrificing the human relationship, but Japanese would choose the human relationship sacrificing the truth. Utterly same as the Chinese, Koreans also choose the Truth.

Thereupon, the anthropologists assert that Japan is “human relationship oriented society,” but China and Korea are “principle-oriented society.” The people in the human relationship oriented society are able to make a living without the principle, but in principle oriented society, people can not lead a life without principle or truth. More than 20 years I have been touching Chinese Christians through sending Bibles to them, and learned many things through the fellowship.

In China, countless young people have been losing their principles of life in the communism ideology through the political confusion, a hegemonic struggle, between the Maotoutonism and the modernizaTOKYO tion group. Then, they have found the unshaken principle of life in Christianity, and have come to the churches in crowds.

At present in China, Christians number more than the communist party. The number in the Chinese communist party is approximately 50 million, and Christians number more than that. And we can say that Korea is a Christian country. There are so many churches, not only in big cities, but also even in small villages in very remote places, there are huge church buildings. What are the reasons which make the difference with Japan? And what makes Japanese so human relation oriented? Obviously, it

is the Japanese Buddhism. As I mentioned above, the harmony (Wa) has been emphasized so much in Japanese Buddhism, rather than truth.

At the same time, automatically, absoluteness has been hated, and relativism is highly valued. Countless Japanese say, “I respect Christianity, but I do not like her absolutes.” As I have proven above, emphasizing harmony and the relativism of Japanese Buddhism hinders the Japanese from coming to the Gospel. (In anything, there are some exceptions, e.g. Nichiren Buddhism emphasizes the truth and absoluteness highly valued.)

4. Shintoism

Then, what about Shintoism? Shintoism is the original Japanese religion and very complicated.

An ethnologist, Masaki Sugata published several books on Shintoism. And in one of his books, he consumed 22 pages to explain about the many kinds of names of gods in Shintoism. Shintoism is utterly polytheistic and very animistic. In animism, any thing could be god: mountains, rivers, animals, even human beings, etc. Some Shinto shrines worship foxes, others snakes, and so on. However, many specialists of Shintoism insist that actually Shintoism was not polytheistic, but monotheistic when it began.

“Amenominakanushi” in Kojiki means “the god who sits on the center of heaven.” Then, there is comprehension of the Creator, a very high view of God. But the problem is this: why such a high view of God does not get into the heart of Japanese? When and through what were the Japanese influenced by polytheism? Perhaps, Shintoism failed to impart monotheism to the descendants. At present, Shintoism has completely been possessed by animism. And animism from the Shintoism prevent the Japanese from coming to the Gospel. As everybody knows, according to the evolutionary presupposition, in the beginning there was polytheism, which gradually evolved to monotheism. But actually and historically, from the beginning there was monotheism, but because of sin, often human beings have fallen into polytheism.

Anyway, Shintoism could never succeed monotheism to the Japanese. (Touching on the relationship between Shintoism and Judaism of the Old Testament, Mr.Koji Soma will make this clear in his workshop.)

5. The miracles among Animism world

If so, is there any hope of their salvation among them? Actually, the miracles have been occurring. All of a sudden, through some political and social upheaval, countless people have come to Jesus among the mountain peoples of Myanmar and India, and the Dayak people in the jungle of Kalimantan, Indonesia, who had been rejecting the Gospel for a long time. Obviously, it was not in vain to sow the seeds of the Gospel for hundreds of years. We have to know that the seeds of the Gospel have life and power. They never fall to the ground in vain.

Who knows, someday suddenly countless Japanese people may come to Jesus in crowds. In 1968, I baptized countless Dayak people (head hunters) in a jungle of west Kalimantan (Borneo) in Indonesia and established many churches. But I did not sow even one seed of the Gospel. Then who had sown the seeds?

The American Reformed church did it. More than a hundred years ago, with almost no reaping. But they did not stop sowing. And one day, all of a sudden, the time to reap had come. Someone who does not know the truth would say, “It is no use to distribute tracts, or visit house to house to preach the Gospel. Radio or TV ministries are also not effective, etc.” He does not know the power of the seed of the Gospel. Let me say once again, “The seed of the Gospel never falls to the ground in vain.” Let us do our jobs!

Conclusion

Now we know what we should do in our evangelization. In any countries or any mission fields, we just obey the commandments of Jesus. Jesus commanded us very clearly saying “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation”(Mark 16:15) And “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached <Keryugma> to save those who believe“ (I Cor 1:21). The early churches and the apostle Paul obeyed the command 100% and preached the Gospel to all people (Acts 5:28, 19:10). Why is it so important to preach the Gospel to all people? Because it links so tightly with the end of the world (Mt 24:14); that is the accomplishment of our task of the world mission. That’s why we have to preach the Gospel to all people “in season and out of season,”(2 Tim 4:2) in fertile mission fields or the barren ones. Then the end will come. Maranatha, come Lord quickly!!