



Christianity and Japanese Culture – Two Interviews with YUKI Hideo

The following two interviews with Prof. Yuki Hideo, at the time director of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, appeared 1996 and 1999 in the Japan Christian Activity News (JCAN), published by the National Christian Council in Japan (NCC-J). In the first interview, Prof. Yuki focuses mainly on the work of the NCC Study Center and what it offers the church in Japan and worldwide. In the second interview he speaks about his personal experiences as a Christian in Japan and what that means. Both interviews reflect his ongoing concern with the relationship between Christianity and Japanese culture, and especially the Western cultural "baggage" Christian missionaries brought to Japan. With the kind permission by the staff of the Japan Christian Activity News, the two interviews were reprinted in Japanese Religions Vol. 25 (Nos. 1&2) 2000: 28-35 in slightly revised form.



The NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions



JCAN: Prof. Yuki, would you briefly explain what brought you to work in this Study Center?

Yuki: When I was a student, most Christian students studied Christian teachings only. But I felt that if Christianity in Japan is to become Japanese Christianity, or if we are to become Christian Japanese, we must know about our Japanese traditional religions – otherwise we exclude our own Japanese roots. So I decided to study Comparative Religions. When this Study Center opened, I participated in some of the conferences it organized. Later I was invited to become Associate Director and then director. In some sense, this is my life's work.

JCAN: Would you please describe the Center's main goals?

Yuki: I think one purpose of our Center is to look at traditional Japanese religions from the standpoint of Christianity so that we can refresh our Christian faith. But I also think a main goal of the Center is to make Japanese people, Japanese Christians, aware that you "must not only study Christian theology but you must also understand Japanese religiosity."

Christianity and other religions in Japan

JCAN: Given these goals, what is the general attitude of Japanese Christians and the churches toward other religions?

Yuki: Historically speaking Protestant Christianity in Japan has emphasized an exclusive type of evangelization, so most Japanese Christian academics and theologians, as well as lay members of Japanese congregations, have not been very interested in the study of Japanese religions. This was the atmosphere in the past – but today I think this is beginning to change. In the past five or ten years the atmosphere has gradually changed – but I have to say that Japanese Christians still do not show much interest in knowing about Japanese religions.

JCAN: Is there any way to explain this lack of interest?

Yuki: When Protestant Christianity came to Japan for the first time in the 19th century, the method of evangelizing or teaching the people about Christianity went like this: “The other religions are wrong; the other religions have distorted teachings. Christianity is the only good, true religion; so you must throw away your traditional beliefs and traditional way of life. Instead you must adopt Christian beliefs and the Western Christian way of life.” Once the Japanese converted to Christianity they asked, “Why do we have to learn about the old religions? If we have some remnant of traditional religions, we must try to throw it away.” Now, I am speaking in a general way – there were some exceptions – but in general this has been the attitude of Japanese Christians for many years.

For another thing, around the beginning of this century, Japan became an imperialistic state and the Emperor was made almost an almighty God, so absolute obedience to the Emperor became a kind of religious act. Even Japanese Christians could not resist the demands of State Shinto, so during World War II Christian churches had to have some kind of ceremony to worship the Emperor, and Christian leaders had to pay visits to Shinto shrines. We had to show our reverence to the ancestors of the Imperial House, so we had to compromise more or less. Consequently, after World War II the attitude of Japanese Christians became narrower, because during the war compromise was very threatening. We thought, “From now on we must be much stronger in our Christian faith.” Now, however, gradually the influence of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is coming to Japan and this is one reason that Japanese Christians, especially church leaders, are realizing that study and dialogue with people of other religions is important.

Theological motivation for interreligious dialogue

JCAN: From your personal standpoint then, as Director of this Study Center and as a Christian, what is your theological motivation for interreligious dialogue?

Yuki: As a Christian I commit myself to the Christian way of living and naturally I must accept the Christian religion as the unique, best, or final answer to this life and its problems. I must express my own belief very frankly, but at the same time I must accept my neighbor's integrity. Then we can have real dialogue. I do hope that finally from this encounter he or she will accept my belief, but this is only my hope. I cannot force my belief on others. On this point I think the evangelization of the 19th and early 20th century had a negative effect. The missionaries honestly did not think that traditional Japanese people had their own integrity. Today evangelization should be real encounter or dialogue. Concerning the result – leave that to God!

JCAN: I sense that “mission” can no longer be defined as it was in the past. If this is so, how can we better understand the meaning of “mission” today?

Yuki: “Mission” in the original sense is not evangelization – it means “commitment.” “It is my mission, my calling, to do something.” “Mission” is sometimes understood to simply mean evangelization, but evangelization is only one aspect of Christian mission. Christian mission, of course, includes the traditional way of evangelization, but in the long history of Christianity, the so called diaconal services for the poor and handicapped offered with no ulterior motives, were a type of mission as well.

JCAN: So would you say we are going back to an even older understanding of “mission”?

Yuki: Yes, in a sense, we must go back to a much older, more traditional concept of mission, but at the same time, we must define a new concept of mission. Today we live in a religiously pluralistic society. We must seek to know what God's providence is in this pluralistic world. There are many Muslims and Buddhists in the world – are they merely to be objects of our evangelization? In this respect it is interesting to look at what the European churches are doing.

In Great Britain today the context of religious education is changing. Until quite recently, they simply taught Christian doctrine, as most of the people were at least nominally Christian. But today there is a new social situation. In Great Britain there are many Hindu and Muslim adherents, so now the British are thinking about new strategies for dealing with other religions and belief systems. But in Japan the situation is very different. Generally speaking, the Japanese people are mostly of one race, one ethnicity, and yet for the most part, Japanese Christians have been told to discard their ethnic roots.

JCAN: It must be very difficult for Japanese Christians to exclude their cultural traditions.

Yuki: Yes, so like Great Britain, we must set up a good, consistent theology of religions and then we must rewrite the textbooks or make a new curriculum for Japanese Christians.

The work of the NCC Study Center

JCAN: As the Study Center is playing a vital part in this process, how can information about what the Center is doing be increased?

Yuki: One way is through the annual seminars for Japanese pastors. Those who attend begin to understand the meaning of this kind of institute. We also publish the journals *Japanese Religions* in English and *Deai* (Encounter) in Japanese. I think these periodicals function well in providing articles on Japanese religions and on the new Christian understanding of mission and the meaning of dialogue. Recently our staff have suggested starting a publication for the local churches. Also, the newsletters of the Tokyo-based NCC have regularly presented articles on and advertisements for our Study Center. We do not have any short-cuts – but we must proceed with perseverance. I think this Study Center will function as an institution that will communicate to Japanese churches the meaning and importance of interreligious cooperation.

(From JCAN, Winter 1996)

Conversion to Christianity

JCAN: I understand you were born in 1926 and became a Christian during the war.

Prof. Yuki: Yes, that is correct.

JCAN: How did you become a Christian?

Yuki: When my mother was a high school student, she sometimes participated in house meetings held by a missionary. After she graduated, however, for many years she had no relationship with a church congregation. When I reached elementary school age, a new church was built in our neighborhood, and my mother took me there and asked the pastor to allow me to participate in its Sunday school program.

JCAN: That must have been right in the middle of the war. What was it like?

Yuki: It was terrible. There were very few parishioners and fewer pastors. Sometimes pastors had to work in other places just to support themselves.

JCAN: How did this shape your faith?

Yuki: During the war, with the atmosphere being filled with ultra-nationalistic talk, reading the Bible and listening to the teachings of the church leaders gave me a clear sense of being a Christian. *That* is being Christian.

JCAN: But didn't you feel you were a minority?

Yuki: I have two things to say on this point. The first is what a lay leader told us, "There is much talk from the government about what it means to be patriotic. However, that is not patriotism. Patriotism is believing in the true God and praying for Japan." At that moment I felt I was in a minority group, but I also felt that I was truly loving Japan. The second point is that I opposed the actions of the Japanese government and its nationalistic ideology but I never lost my Japaneseness. I did not become western when I became Christian.

JCAN: But weren't you accused of becoming western?

Yuki: Yes, but that is a matter of style. American style. English style. German style. But we still felt we were Japanese. 1942, the year I was baptized, was the worst year for ultra-nationalism, particularly the Christmas of that year. Therefore, the "Christian boom" after the war was something that I disliked.

Christian identity after World War II

JCAN: Why didn't you like the post-war "Christian boom"?

Yuki: You have to understand, we persevered as Christians during the worst period of Japan's history. Of course at any time in history each person's choice to be baptized is an individual struggle. However, in the post-war period, in general, society accommodated many of these new Christians. It was almost a fad, a way to show you were democratic, modern. I think it can be considered a "fashion." Society never accommodated us during the war. We had to struggle to change Japan; however, we were not opposed to Japan. Of course, in the post-war period the number of Christians was rising. However, the real meaning of becoming Christian is to change. Not to become American. Not to become waestern. But to make Japan more Japanese.

JCAN: Is that the meaning of Christianity?

Yuki: Yes. To me it is for each person and each group to become more of what God had made them to be. So for Koreans it is not throwing off their national identity, but to become more Korean. However, there are criteria. It cannot mean for Japan

to glorify and deify the emperor out of ultra-nationalism. When we recognize God then good things will come about. Again, this does not mean throwing out everything Japanese. We must also ask. "What are the social implications?" "What is my new identity?" God, as Creator, made many different varieties of people. And it is not meant for those varieties to be simplified into a set type. Earlier missionaries asked us to become one type: modern. But now we see the value of variety implied in the confession, "We believe in one God, Creator of heaven and earth ..."

Christianity and culture in Japan

JCAN: What is the difference between Japanese and Western Christianity?

Yuki: Westerners are born into a Christian society and therefore they are raised in a culture that has Christianity and Christendom together. However, countries like Japan that have received Christianity more recently, have both the religion and the culture of Christianity to contend with. The good thing about this is that Japanese Christians must clarify what Christian religion means to them, while western Christians do not necessarily need to do this because their religion is part of the culture. In a sense, if Japanese Christians do not clarify their faith they will not become Christian. Each person must search for her or his faith. Therefore, in a non-Christian world one's identity as a Christian becomes clearer, whereas in the West church members may be considered to be enrolled even if they do not attend the church.

The good point for westerners in Christendom is that even if they themselves do not struggle they can still take in the teachings of Christianity, they can have a Christian way of life. However, if Japanese Christians do not struggle to be Christian they will not develop that "Christian way of life," and their identity will suffer. Westerners do not face this problem of losing their Christian identity because Christianity permeates society, at home, among friends, and during holiday celebrations.

JCAN: My previous image was that for Japanese to become Christian they must lose some of their Japanese-ness. However, you are saying that is not so. You have stated, "For Japanese, being Christian is to make Japan more Japanese."

Yuki: Yes, that is true. However, previous missionaries made the mistake of thinking that to become Christian was to be modern. Among other things, they would advocate throwing away everything Japanese. And those who could throw away their Japanese identity were most welcomed by these missionaries. They embraced a western way of life: Coffee in the morning, no public bath, sleeping in beds. There is a presumption behind your question of identity. If there were none then there would be no problem with Japanese Christian identity and Japanese identity.

I am sure you are thinking that there are aspects of Japaneseness that are incompatible with Christianity. A prominent example of this is the deification of the Emperor and the present emperor system.

Christianity and Japan's religions

An example westerners may understand better, however, is the custom of honoring the dead. It is difficult to say where culture ends and religion begins when people fold their hands together and worship the dead. Westerners have never had this custom and therefore there is no problem for them to confront. Of course Christians must never worship the dead, but some will say that if you do not worship then you are not Japanese. Therefore, the problem arises what to do at a Buddhist funeral.

This takes us back to the problem of the conflict between Japanese Christian identity and Japanese identity. I think one way to begin to work through these problems is to ask, "What are the criteria here?" "What is the intent" "What is the meaning behind the actions?" It may mean to honor the memory of the dead, to show respect and recall good times spent together.

From a standard western Christian perspective the actions of the Japanese Christian may appear to be worship. However, these Christians have analyzed what they are doing and the implications of their actions, and they have come to the conclusion that what they are doing is not necessarily "worshipping." However, some churches say that following standardized Christian teaching means that you must not worship when you go to a Buddhist funeral. And while we may not worship, we must take the time to analyze our own actions and make our own decision as to what they mean. If Japanese take their cues for behavior from the west, then they will never be able to hue out their own Christian identity.

JCAN: The image many have of Japanese becoming Christian is what Paul says, "Throwing off the old self and putting on the new self." How is this carried out in Japan?

Yuki: I believe Paul was making a spiritual point.

JCAN: OK. But some western missionaries would say that all family shrines need to be thrown out as they are symbols of the devil.

Yuki: When Protestant missionaries came here more than 100 years ago that was the first stage of evangelism. They did not understand the culture and simply sought to throw out everything Japanese. However, we need to have criteria based on the Gospel for keeping what is Japanese. Again, funerals are a good example of this. What are the criteria for attending a Buddhist funeral? What is my intent? What do my actions mean?

JCAN: I have a similar experience. My mission is interdenominational, but I am the only Roman Catholic with my mission in Japan. I often hear the criticism that we worship Mary. However, for us nothing could be further from the truth. It may appear to be worship, but for us it is clearly not.

Yuki: Yes, that is a good example for Japanese Christians. We need to ask what are the criteria for and intent of my actions instead of just throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

JCAN: How have missionaries missed this point in the past?

Yuki: Previously missionaries came not only to spread the Good News but to “ask the Japanese to change their old-fashioned and uncivilized ways.” These missionaries could not understand the different lifestyle of Japanese people of the time because they lived in western-style housing, huge houses compared to the ordinary Japanese houses. For example, shortly after the war there was a young missionary couple who wanted to live as the Japanese did but their mission board refused to grant them permission. “You cannot sleep on the floor. You cannot use the same bath for the whole family. These things are unhealthy.” These days there would be no problem, but it does illustrate the misunderstanding of what mission means.

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