





YUKI Hideo\*

## The Future of the Christian School – Is Christianity a Marketable Commodity? \*\*

Today, more than 120 years since the arrival of the missionaries in the last days of the Tokugawa regime (1603-1868), Christians in Japan account for a mere one percent of the population. One wonders why, especially when comparing this with the Christian population in neighboring South Korea. We have been discussing the reasons why for a long time now.<sup>1</sup>

This one percent – if one excludes the non-church movement<sup>2</sup> – denotes only those who have been baptized in a church service. However, if one interprets baptism in a broad sense, Japanese who have been “baptized” are unexpectedly numerous. For example, one cannot discuss Japanese literature after the Meiji period (1868-1912) without considering Christian influence. That influence is also reflected in the social doctrine and philosophy of the time and even in the active sphere of social and political movements. However, keeping to our wide interpretation of “baptized,” Christianity’s greatest medium of influence was the Christian school. If we include day care centers and kindergartens in the term “school,” then perhaps 20 percent of the population have had some education in a Christian school. Bible study or attendance at religious functions brought students into contact with Christianity at some time before graduating and entering society.



---

\* Yuki Hideo was born on April 28, 1926, in Tokyo. He is Professor Emeritus of Doshisha University School of Theology and Director of the NCC (National Christian Council in Japan) Center for the Study of Japanese Religions. He is a member of the Board of Trustees, Japanese Association for Religious Studies since 1979. His books in Japanese include *Christianity and Japan* (1978), *Religions of the World* (1980), *Christianity and Japanese Religions* (1988) and *History of Religion* (1990).

\*\* Published first in *Japan Missionary Journal* Vol. 51 (No. 3) 1997: 166-171, and reprinted here with the kind permission by its Editor, Fr. Mukengeshayi Matata (Oriens Institute, Tokyo). Footnotes have been added by the Editor of the present volume.

1. Christians in South Korea constitute more than 25% of the population.
2. Mu-kyōkai was founded by Uchimura Kanzo 1901 in opposition to westernized mission churches. It is a group mostly of intellectuals (some of them have been quite influential) which is mainly concerned with Bible study and does not have liturgical services, sacraments and ordained priests. It is said to have ca. 35,000 members.

But what of our Christian schools of today? Few, if any, of our students ask for baptism. Indeed the criticism is that our Christian influence is so slight we could hardly say our graduates are “baptized” even in the wider sense I used above. Is “Christian School” a name and nothing more, or does it still even now carry its own special significance?

I have been using the term “Christian school” without giving a definition or explanation. Actually the title is rarely used at all. Ever since the Meiji period people have called them “mission schools.” Even schools that were not founded by mission societies or church bodies went by this name. Doshisha University in Kyoto was not founded by missionaries, as the staff there will tell you emphatically, but it is known nonetheless as a “mission school!” At present a great number of mission schools have lost their Christian management, but the staff and the people in charge are at pains to explain that they are based on Christian principles. The ordinary populace, however, will not express it like that. In the Japanese language, “mission school” is a fixed term denoting a school that is connected with Christianity.

This is a fact worth noting. You may write it off, if you wish, as the way a custom takes root, but one does detect a “modern,” “Western” nuance in the term “mission school.” There were Westerners on the staff; foreign languages, to a greater or lesser degree were spoken there; there was a freshness, a feel of the West about it. That was the image portrayed, and it appealed to modern Japanese with Western leanings. Now, as we approach the end of the twentieth century the West has lost some of its glamour, but there are places still where the roots are strong. And Christianity was a part of that wonderful Western atmosphere. Even at a time when the whole population went ultra-nationalistic, Christianity still enjoyed an unexpectedly high rating.

The formal appellation “a school run on Christian principles” has for most people (excluding those who have received church baptism) a strange, unfamiliar ring to it. We do not notice such resistance to the word “Christian.” So, the problem seems to be with the term “principles”; there is something stiff and angular about it. Does adding “principles” to “Christian” strengthen it? No, it does not seem to work like that. On the contrary one gets the feeling that it may not be the real Christianity. Perhaps that is the reason why, even within the church itself, people do not really care for the expression “a school run on Christian principles.”

It is not certain when or by whom the term “on Christian principles” was first used, but the best known source is the book *Our Purpose in Founding Doshisha University* (1888)<sup>3</sup> by Niijima Jō (1843-1890).<sup>4</sup> Tokutomi Ichiro (1863-1957)<sup>5</sup> is said to have collaborated in the writing this very long work. Here we read the following about the aim of establishing this school:

The purpose in mind is not merely the study of English. We want to foster the unique personality of our students and improve their conduct. The aim is not merely to give them certain skills but to graduate citizens who know how to conduct themselves according to their conscience. This kind of education will not be content with a one-sided emphasis on academic knowledge, nor shall it be the Confucianism that has already lost its power over the human heart. It will be based on Christian principles, belief in God the Creator, love of truth and feeling for one's fellow man. I founded this university, not to spread Christianity, but because I believe it was Christian principles that formed me in my youth and gave me a sense of honor. I want to apply those principles to education. My only wish is to train people who will conduct themselves honorably according to those Christian principles.

When a mission establishes a school, it is apt to be used as a means for spreading a religion. At the very least it is easily interpreted in that way. I feel that Niijima was wary of that and put certain constraints on himself. But his was not a watered down version of Christianity. In my opinion he was convinced that without genuine Christianity he could not achieve real education. When he used the term “Christian principles” that was his way of expressing the claim that authentic Christianity was the very foundation of the school, and the education there would be conducted according to its standards.

We come now to the present-day use of the term. Somehow one gets the impression that it does not denote genuine, unreserved Christianity. One feels it is being used in the sense of education with a Christian nuance or flavor. Recently we often hear expressions such as “What we are trying to give is not Christian education but a Christian-principle education.” Christianity is present among other things; it takes its place alongside other subjects; there are Christian activities and other activities. But these “other things” have almost no connection with

- 
3. The website of Doshisha University has published a short text with the title “The Aim in Establishing Doshisha University” in a slightly different translation than the one offered below. However, both versions contain the term “Christian principles.”
  4. Japanese Christian and founder of Doshisha University and Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts, both in Kyoto. His name is written also as Joseph Hardy Neesima.
  5. Influential journalist and publisher of newspapers and magazines between the late Meiji period and the end of the Pacific War. He had studied at Doshisha University.

Christianity. That is the image one forms of many Christian schools today. They are, to say the least, a long way from Nijijima's ideal of an education imbued with Christian principles.

We should note that in his book *Our Purpose in Founding Doshisha University*, Nijijima lays great emphasis on the significance of private schools. Not that he denies the importance of state-run institutes because he says they are eminently useful. But he goes on to say:

I believe, however, that a university founded by one of themselves will have a tremendous influence on the common people. If we consider the funds and the equipment available at a private school, it cannot compete with the State, but we must recognize its power to draw out the unique personality of its students and train independent-minded citizens.

This passage is directly concerned with privately-run universities, but I think there is nothing against applying it to private schools in general. And here we come to another matter of phraseology. Japanese are readily inclined to interpret "private" (*shiteki* 私的) as something secluded, away from the public gaze. The expression *watakushi-goto* 私事 denotes a private, personal affair, something you do not, or better, should not display in public. If, for some reason, you must bring it up, you cushion it by saying "Sorry to intrude in a private matter but ...," and so on. Now, if one were to take this line of reasoning, it would be easy to see schools as the special province of the State and private schools being "allowed" to exist only by the gracious permission of the State. But in Nijijima's philosophy a "private university" is "a university established by the people themselves." It is the people, the public who support and subsidize the State, so when the people establish a university it is by no means a private, personal affair. It is a public affair. Therefore the term "private" here is not the opposite of "public" but rather the citizens' initiative vis-a-vis officialdom. For that reason precisely, a private university is a good place for training independent-minded citizens who stand on their own feet.

How do our modern Christian schools measure up on this point? It seems they find almost no problem with the system whereby they are "allowed" to operate by permission of the authorities; they tag along tamely with instructions from the city office; they actually think their school standard is improving if it comes to resemble a state school even a little. Small wonder then if they find it difficult to plot their position as Christian schools: they cannot abandon Christianity nor can they give it full scope. Some critics might say they are just puttering about.

Children, so plentiful in the days after World War II, are now becoming fewer with every year that passes. It signals a bleak winter for private schools in general. Many of them, worried out of their wits, are busy planning strategies for survival. In the circumstances Christian schools have no grounds for complacency either. In fact one hears the talk that this is not a time to worry about where we stand with

regard to Christianity. Their Christian character, they say, is not now a matter of educational policy and being true to one's name but something to be seen from the management angle. Indeed it does seem now that a number of Christian schools are considering their Christianity for its advertising value: it has become a marketable commodity.

Above we mentioned in connection with the term "mission school" how Christianity got an expectedly high rating among modern Japanese with Western leanings. Christianity stood for the dignity of the human person, equality, liberty, social justice and international peace. As such it was a religion that people were ready to go along with. Especially in the case of girls' schools, the expectations were high. Parents felt their daughters would acquire not only a modern outlook on society and the family but also the skills they would need as housewives. In Christian schools also, so it went, there would be plenty of foreign teachers and the opportunity to learn real English and other languages. The prospect of going abroad to study in the West was also a big attraction.

It is useless to argue with someone who says seriously that Christianity is a commodity and marketable. However, if you take the statement casually, our Christianity actually did have a sales value. But that is looking at it from the effect attained or from society's point of view. As Nijima said, a Christian school is not established with the intention of "selling" something. But now, given the bleak prospect facing private academies, there does seem to be a tendency among Christian schools to think of their Christianity from the sales angle.

Here let us consider the value of a "brand" name. In Japan, all schools that operate with the approval of the authorities, whether privately or state-run, have the same standing. If the product to be sold is standardized and the quality reaches a certain average all across the board, then the deciding factor will be the brand name. And if, on the label, you can display some special feature that others do not have, then you are in a strong position. Granted the decline in pro-Western feeling and the obvious awakening to a sense of East-Asian values and religion,<sup>6</sup> it does seem that Christianity still retains some value in a school's name plate. But, who can say how long this will last?

Then there is the "content" aspect. Does it have a market value? It was, as we said, one of the attractions of a Christian school that it had many missionaries, especially American, on the staff so that the foreign languages taught there were authentic. This situation continues but only to a certain extent. There is a sudden decline in the number of missionaries from the West while on the other hand non-Christian schools established exchange programs for foreign teachers, who are coming to Japan in large numbers now. It is no longer the peculiar boast of the Christian school that here one can learn real English and enjoy the prospect of

---

6. This characterizes a contemporary tendency in Japan during the 1990's.

studying abroad. Then, from the very fact of relying on the presence of missionaries and their connection with the West, Christian schools have fallen behind other schools which have been turning their attention to Asia and Africa. Our conclusion is that it will become gradually more difficult to maintain Christianity as a marketable commodity.

Finally, we come to the real core of our problem, what of Christianity itself as found in the classroom? In the Meiji period and immediately after World War II, a fair number of the students attending our schools came with the right motive: they came to learn not about Christianity as a subject but to study it as a way of life. The number of students who now come to us with this motive are almost nil. There is an enormous change in the make up of young people's field of interest; Christianity has little or no appeal for them.

That is not to say that Christianity as taught in the classroom has lost its commodity value. Everywhere the cry is "Internationalize!" and many now see a profit in having a knowledge of Christianity as a religion of the West. Was it an intentional response to this demand or was it a natural tendency, I cannot say, but for the most part, Christian education as imparted in Christian schools today is purely academic, the transmitting of knowledge about the Christian religion. But even where the subject receives a certain emphasis in the classroom, worship in a chapel is regarded lightly. Of course, depending on the school, there are ways of giving weight and prominence to chapel exercises, but on the whole I think what I have said above is true. And even should the spiritual and religious aspect of Christianity be treated fully in the classroom, in the last analysis it will be an academic exercise. The imbalance between chapel and classroom can only bring an added impetus to the commodity value of Christianity, i. e., its value as a subject to be studied.

Here we may draw a certain conclusion. If the management of a school is preoccupied with the market value of its Christianity, and if that value should suddenly evaporate, then that school's Christianity is doomed. Some Christian schools which are heading into this bleak winter we spoke of, are extremely worried about the school's survival, but they are not so worried about the survival of its Christianity. If we look into the matter, however, in a sense it may be only natural. The term "management" above means in effect the school board and the staff. The great majority of these, although they are involved with the school, are not always involved with Christianity. That is the present condition. Depending on the school the only ones really involved with Christianity are the staff members who teach the subject. In this case, the "people involved" with Christianity are dependent on the good will of the others, the "people who are not involved" who greatly outnumber them. Thus, the staff members directly involved might well worry about the survival of the school's Christianity, but most likely outsiders will see them as being worried about their own survival.



In such circumstances I think it is no exaggeration to say that the students who graduate from our Christian schools today take with them very little of the Christian spirit. They have not had a Christian baptism even in the broad sense I used the word at the beginning of this article.

Criticism is easy but what on earth are we to do? Several answers may occur, but most certainly the first thing is to increase the number of people who are “involved with Christianity.” That is where we must start, and the effort must continue. Further, schools which enjoy a fair number of board members and staff who are involved with Christianity must spare no pains to maintain that position. Here, let us be cautious. The time when the system is most easily overturned is when a school begins to expand. It adds a higher academic level, for example, or incorporates a grade school affiliate. Universities may increase departments and faculties. That is where temptations arise. In Japan, where the Christian population is so tiny, unless the number of staff “involved in Christianity” is maintained or increased at the same time, the maintenance and development of an authentic Christian school is impossible. This does not mean that we are making little of those not directly involved with Christianity or trying to push them aside. Not at all. Without their cooperation the school cannot develop. However, I would like to treat this at another time.

I would like to conclude with a few ideas on the problem of communication and cooperation between Christian schools and the church. If we look back over the past, we cannot say by any means that the relationship between the schools and the church was always good. In as much as a Christian school is Christian it should have a special place in its heart for the church, but in actual fact the tendency was to view Christianity in schools and Christianity in the church as separate. On the part of the church also, it did not take a proper view of Christian schools. (In the case of the Anglican Church, both school and church are under the authority of the bishop.<sup>7</sup> School chaplains and church pastors can replace each other. As far as theory goes this has its good side, but it is an exception among Christian schools in Japan).

Speaking generally, churches in Japan were mainly interested in the direct apostolate, i. e., in instructing catechumens and making converts; they had little interest in indirect ministry. The ambition for each church to be independent was very strong: the idea was that somehow they “must” support the pastor and his family and maintain the church buildings. It was easy for Christians who had been baptized in that church to get wrapped up in maintaining it.

What we need is a wider distribution of personnel and Christian faithful who are available. They should be sent into many different areas of society. I would like the church to make a special effort to place more personnel in Christian schools,

---

7. This is true also of the Catholic Church and schools. The gap between church and school is found in many Protestant denominations.

hospitals and social welfare institutions. I would like people who have received baptism in the church to live with the intention of conferring “baptism” in the broad sense on the other members of society. It is precisely through that kind of activity that people asking for baptism will increase.

Niijima said he did not establish his university with the idea of spreading Christianity. It is only right that a school should not be a tool or means to an end in the hands of the church. However, if a Christian school grows and matures along the proper lines, the church will develop. In the same way, if the church prospers so will the Christian school.