

Cultural and Linguistic Barriers to Communicating the Christian Religion in Japan

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Introduction

I have lived in Japan for 45 years, retired a year ago, and am now living in Claremont, California. My main work was that of a minister and teacher in a college and seminary in Tokyo. I struggled all those years to make some kind of Christian impact on Japanese people, but after several decades, I and many, many others engaged in Christian work in Japan, are asking the question: "Why so little results from our work? Why doesn't the Christian community in Japan grow? What are the barriers to communicating the Christian religion which keep the percentage of Christians in the total population at one percent – one of the lowest of any country in the world?"

Although there are many complicated answers to these questions, I would like to look briefly at some of the cultural and linguistic barriers which seem to me to be very powerful obstacles to the communication of Christianity in Japan.

No doubt some of you might feel that there is no need to propagate Christianity in East Asia in the first place, inasmuch as Buddhism is – or was – the traditional religion of those countries. If that is the case, all I can say is that we simply have to start on the assumption that this speaker does believe Christianity has something to offer which the Japanese people need, and that is why I am interested in probing into this subject.

I. DIFFERENCES IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

In the first place, the difficulty of communicating Christianity lies in the lack of a common understanding of religion or "religiosity" as such. I.e., the culturally conditioned manner of perceiving religion is different for most Japanese than for most Westerners. Let me mention just three examples.

A. Religion as feeling

For instance, the common Japanese approach is to perceive religion as being essentially non-rational. Religion is not a matter of truth, but a matter of feeling. Doctrine and theology are very much secondary to intuition and emotion. One should choose a religion on the basis of what appeals to emotional inclinations. But this approach to religion undercuts the Christian concern for truth. The rather strongly academic, rational theology prevalent in the Japanese churches runs counter to this stream of normal Japanese religious feeling, and therefore tends to make it unacceptable.

B. Syncretism

Again, Japanese religiosity is characterized by a syncretistic view of all religion. Most Japanese are both Buddhist and Shintoist at the same time, with no feeling of incongruity. The total population of Japan is about 125,000,000, but official surveys of religious affiliation show that if you add up the total number of those who claim some affiliation with a religion or religions, that total number is about 220,000,000. But this syncretistic way of thinking about religion is hardly in harmony with the Christian view, which in general assumes an exclusive commitment on the part of believers to what they consider to be the true Way.

C. Folk religion

Or again, much Japanese religious practice can be characterized as "folk religion." This refers to the unorganized, non-institutional religious ideas and practices of ordinary people. Such beliefs are innumerable and include such things as a strong belief in lucky and unlucky days, unlucky numbers, onomancy (telling one's fortune by one's name), astrology, *hoigaku* (fate determined by the direction which one's house and rooms in the house face), shamanism, venerating the little stone images along the roadside called *ojizosama*, etc.

Although most Westerners slough these ideas off as simply quaint customs or sheer superstition, they are more than that to the average Japanese. Consider the fact, for instance, that wedding halls and crematories alike are empty on unlucky days.

So before one even starts talking about religion at all, there is a wide gulf to be bridged between the mentality which has been set by Japanese cultural background and that of the Western Christian.

II. DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING ENGLISH CONCEPTS INTO JAPANESE

But let us assume that a Japanese and a Western Christian have come to terms with

these background differences in the baggage we each carry according to our respective cultural milieus, and are starting to talk about religious beliefs. There we quickly run into more specifically linguistic obstacles. The inability to translate certain key words in religious experience makes for extreme difficulty in communicating Christian meanings.

A. God as *kami*

Let's start at the beginning. It's hard to talk religion without talking about God. But immediately we run into a barrier. For to most Westerners—Christian or not—"God" refers to the supreme Being of the universe. God is often described as almighty, eternal, holy, etc.

But there is profound difficulty in translating this meaning into Japanese, for the English word "God" is translated "*kami*." Other words have been used, such as *ten-shu* ("Lord of heaven"), used by the early Roman Catholics, and it might have been better to use that, but *kami* is almost universally used today.

The problem is that *kami* is an extremely ambiguous word. Shintoism, the national faith of Japan, speaks of the *yaoyorozu no kamigami*, which literally means "the eight million gods." Almost anything can be a *kami* in Shinto—objects of nature and also human persons. The spirits of the departed ancestors can become *kami*, and this veneration of the ancestral spirits is one of the most deeply ingrained family customs not only in Japan but throughout Asia.

Besides these *kami*-phenomena are the founders of a host of new religious movements and sects and cults. The founders of these sects almost invariably lay claim to divinity or to being the bearer of a divine revelation. They are often called *ikigami*, or "living god."

And finally, an insidious combination of religious and political authority is to be found in the national emperor system itself. In this system the Japanese emperor, until just 50 years ago, was deified as *kami* and followed with absolute obeisance. This was evidenced not only in the willing self-sacrifice of the *kamikaze* ("wind of god") pilots during the Pacific War, but was seen in the behavior of the entire citizenry as well. And this system, though revised, is still strongly influential today!

B. Sin as *tsumi*

Let's look at another basic word in the Christian vocabulary, sin. We might think that preachers talk too much about sin, and that may well be. But sin actually refers to the imperfect condition in which individuals and society find themselves, so it is a little hard to make religion meaningful without starting with this spiritual and moral condition of the human situation.

But the problem is that the word “sin” is translated into Japanese as “*tsumi*.” And *tsumi* primarily has the connotation of crime, or some obvious public misdemeanor. But there are very few of the proper, conforming, law-abiding Japanese who have committed crimes – at least not when compared to America’s record! So the instinctive reaction to the Christian preacher’s message about *tsumi* is, “What’s all this talk about us being criminals! That message certainly doesn’t fit us.” So this part of the Christian message doesn’t go over well, partly because of this unfortunate translation, or should we say, the impossibility of a good translation of this concept of human imperfection and the need for some kind of salvation.

III. DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING JAPANESE CONCEPTS INTO ENGLISH

On the other side of the coin, we also observe that certain basic Japanese value concepts do not find counterparts in Western Christian vocabulary. Religion deals with values. It is important that the Christian teacher understand the traditional value system of Japan while trying to introduce new values. Without that, the Christian system might simply be dismissed as being altogether meaningless.

It is intriguing that some of these most distinctive Japanese value concepts are expressed in words which are hardly translatable into English. I feel that the very difficulty of their translation shows the degree to which they point to a peculiar, and therefore vitally important, Japanese reality. We will briefly look at just two of these words.

A. *Wa*

First we must mention “*wa*.” This little word is a foundation block for Japanese society. It refers to group cohesiveness. From ancient times, respect for “*wa*” as the harmony of the group has been a supreme virtue. Ultimate value and authority lie in one’s group; there is no transcendent value to enable the individual to stand alone, or to link various groups together into a larger collectivity. What this means in practice is that there is a strong tendency toward conformity to group opinion and group values. All of this is comprehended in the concept of *wa*.

The typical Japanese does not want to stand alone. The saying “*Deru kugi wa utareru*,” (“The nail which sticks up will get pounded down,”) is common sense to Japanese. Japanese human relations are extremely complex with dependencies and obligations which make everyday life like a spider’s web, or to use a different figure of speech, a swamp. Endo Shusaku has vividly described this in his historical novels about early Roman Catholic Christians. It takes unusual courage to make a truly individual, independent decision, and doing so does not necessarily have the positive meaning that it does in Western society. But in most cases, to become a

Christian requires an individual decision to be "different" from one's group. *Wa* also means "circle," and it is this tightly knit circle of harmony which Christian belief tends to fracture, and that is anything but a virtue for the average Japanese. In fact, in principle it is not a virtue according to Christian values either, so the Christian propagator is left with a serious dilemma. So as I see it, perhaps the greatest obstacle to Christian expansion is not Buddhism – because modern Japanese know virtually nothing about the teachings of Buddhism anyway – but rather it is this social/cultural phenomenon of group solidarity which nobody wants to break.

B. Amae

Let us look at just one more Japanese word which is extremely difficult to translate, namely, *amae*, the noun, or *amaeru*, the verb. This refers to an experience one has to feel in personal relationships; it is not a word to be understood from dictionary definitions. *Amae* has been defined as "the never-ending desire to be loved." It refers to what some call a "dependency syndrome." It is the relationship colored by unspoken feelings of dependency between infant and mother, between husband and wife, and also between company workers and their superiors, and between students and their professors. It is the opposite of the American ideal of "standing on your own two feet" and showing autonomy and independence. It is obviously related to *wa*, discussed above.

The phenomenon of *amae* shows itself in the Christian church when young people become Christian and naturally expect their pastor to "take care of them" in every respect, in such matters as choice of a marriage partner, for example. Relationships are fraught with emotional entanglement; contractual relationships are difficult; consequently, the decision to cross the threshold of a church for the first time and start new relationships in a new circle takes a colossal act of will.

CONCLUSION

Those who propagate Christianity confront the question, "Must we despair of the attempt to communicate this faith verbally? Is it possible that there might be some other way to communicate religious faith?"

If I may be allowed to make a personal comment on that question by way of conclusion, let me say that I believe in the long run actions speak louder than words. And if love and justice are central in Christianity, just and loving deeds, both on an individual interpersonal basis, and on the level of institutions—social welfare work, for instance – these may be the only language which will be really understood by the Japanese. And Christians have done and are doing the works of love and justice

in the midst of the unfriendly cultural milieu of Japan described above, so I for one do not despair of the future of Christianity in Japan.