

Changes in Japan Today: Two Christian Perspectives

Today's Thursday Theology about the state of Christianity in Japan comes to us from two sources:

1. [Richard Leigh](#) lives and works here in St. Louis and is a student at LST (Lutheran School of Theology). He is part of a discussion forum list on the proposition "That They May Be One," moderated by Charles Miller, who wrote a book by that name and posted it on the Internet. The Japanese Presbyterian organization's prayer chain posts (one of which is below) began appearing on the list. He became concerned with their struggles and sent this piece on to us so that we might also be aware of some of the changes taking place in Japan.
2. [Robert G. "Bob" Stieber](#) is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ (USA) and long time friend of the Schroeders who has served in Japan with the Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan (United Church of Christ in Japan) since 1971. He is currently jointly assigned to that denomination's Buraku Liberation Center by the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Buraku Liberation Center leads the Kyodan's efforts to eliminate discrimination against the //buraku//, a Japanese minority group of some 3 million persons, from the church and the society.

Dear Prayer Partners,

Finally Japanese Diet is about to decide Flag-Anthem legislation today. The government was greatly encouraged by this success,

and aiming next major step towards the revival of pre-war nationalism: Yasukuni Shrine nationalization.

1. Yasukuni Shrine Nationalization: Revival of State religion

On August 7th, Cabinet speaker Nonaka said very dangerous statement about YASUKUNI shrine, which was the shrine of Japanese national shintoism during WW2. They desire to realize the "official worship of the Prime Minister" and eventually the emperor himself at Yasukuni shrine. This will be a major step to make the national shintoism as the state religion of Japan. To avoid the criticism, the government this time trying to make the shrine as special institution owned by the government, and to claim to treat this institution not as the religion but the place to honor and console the spirit of the war-dead for the nation by worshipping.

This time, according to Nonaka, the government pretends that this is "Yasukuni(=pacify the nation) cemetery" and just as the national cemetery of any other nation. The government expect any national guest to pay honor at this "Yasukuni cemetery" in future, to give the strength to the legitimacy of new national shintoism.

Worshipping the dead is quite common in Japan except among Christians, so the government sees it as possible to make as a national religion.

There were several attempts to nationalize the Yasukuni shrine in the past, but had been defeated repeatedly because of the voice of cautions against violation of the Constitutional freedom of faith which prohibits to give special status to any specific(especially national shintoistic) religion.

The Yasukuni shrine people themselves do not want to become non-religious super-religion. But the political

parties try to use this shrine as the symbol of revival of the Japanese nationalism.

Yasukuni has been the key to Japanese Nationalism and Emperorism. Because the Japanese Government taught every soldier before WW2 to die for the Emperor, and those dead warriors would be worshipped at Yasukuni. That was the real source of religious power of Japanese soldiers. The soldiers actually believed that they would meet together at the Yasukuni shrine as gods who pacify the world under the sovereignty of the Japanese emperor god. Yasukuni worship as the place for worshipping war dead for the emperor was the practical center of the emperor worship.

2. The Compulsive Requirement of Hinomaru Kimigayo rite: August 2, During the committee meeting in the upper house, Shigenori Yano, in charge of assist Education Bureau in the Ministry of Education, answered, " The teacher, who doesn't obey the order of job (in this case, to refuse to sing Anthem or bow before the flag) as the public servant, must be punished under the local order. And the article 19th of the Constitution (freedom of conscience) does not excuse them." What he said was, the government has authority to rule every teacher and their order is higher than the human right. The ministry of education now officially denies the freedom of conscience. Asahi Newspaper, the leading newsmedia in Japan, reports that the government claims no compulsive requirement of flag and anthem, but through the discussion at the Diet the government has always reserved the requirement of the rite to the teachers. It sounds like no Christian teacher can continue their work without compromising in near future of Japanese public school system.

Also the ministry answered that the teachers will discipline the student when they do not stand for singing

Kimigayo or not listening obediently the teachers' instructions, though they may not be punished for singing it. The ministry said that the teacher does not grade the student according to the participation in the rite so far.

3. We will continue to oppose the rite of Hinomaru and Kimigayo because:

1. To praise and bow before the emperor as national Shintoism demanded before WW2 will destroys the nation. We do not participate the idol worship to the nation or the emperor. We seek Japan as the nation of freedom under Christ the true king rather the nation of the emperor.
2. The government forcing schools to participate in the rite of nationalism endangers the freedom of conscience of teachers, students, and parents. We claim the freedom to obey Christ in every sphere of life of Japan.
3. There is no clear repentance to the invasion during the WW2 by the government. The flag and anthem were cruel symbols for the millions in other Asian nations. We claim our repentance to the past cruelty as the nation: the sins of murder, stealing, rape etc.

We claim the right of education of our children is not of the nation, but of each citizen of the nation as the parents. We refuse the nationalistic education imposed by the government through the public school system. We reserve our right to teach our children to refuse such evil enforcement with courage. We make the effort of guarding the freedom of conscience to refuse Hinomaru Kimigayo at the grass root level of each Japanese city and town, even if the legislation passes.

Sincerely in His service,
Shigeru Takiura
Freedom Prayer Chain
Reformed Presbyterian Church Japan Presbytery
Pastor, Okamoto Covenant RPC

Let me make my response with some background material. The current government is a coalition led by the "Liberal Democratic Party." It has been able to get good support from two other parties, both of which have similar conservative (they say "centrist") agendas. One of those parties, "Komeito," is deeply linked to the new-religion "Sokka Gakkai." It is no secret that the group's leadership would like to be in a position to run Japan. In order for the LDP to get its programs through the Diet, it has enlisted the aid of the Komeito.

This gives the Komeito a lot of clout, which is a cause for concern. The following series of recent legislation, passed because of the existence of the coalition, indicates the trend which produces this concern.

1. Passage of "New Guidelines for Mutual Defense" (not the official title): These are the rules and regulations under which Japan and the US cooperate militarily. The new revision allows Japan to commandeer non-military facilities (airports, ports, hospitals, etc.) in case of "regional emergencies," not specifically defined, and the general opinion is that Japan will turn over such facilities for US military use whenever the US asks. Already, US aircraft and ships have "visited" non-military airports/ports in what is clearly a demonstration of intended future use. The US's responsibility for pushing Japan toward re-militarization in the name of "defense cooperation" is an ongoing concern, and one which I doubt

many people in the US are even aware of.

2. Establishment of Hinomaru ("Sun Flag")/Kimigayo ("May the Emperor's Reign Last a Thousand Years" song) as national flag & national anthem: The prayer request uses the term "rite" in relation to these. I think that is a bit misleading. Until now, Japan has not had a legally established flag or anthem. The reason has been strong political opposition, particularly from the Communist and Socialist parties and other small parties and independents. However, the coalition has been able to overcome that by numbers. Both the flag and the song have been used for Japan in international settings (the Olympics) etc., and within Japan for years. Thus this legislation is, in a sense, only an affirmation of the reality which exists. However, making it official opens up all sorts of "worst scenario" possibilities. This stems from the fact that the flag is the same one which was used as the symbol of Imperial Japan. That means it was a symbol of the Emperor's rule and the Emperor's absolute authority over all the population. Many feel that Japan should take a new flag, as did Germany and Italy, as a symbol of a rejection of Japanese imperialism and repentance for what Imperial Japan did, under that flag, to other countries, particularly Asian countries. Because of the emperor-connection, many also feel that it is not a proper symbol for a democratic nation. The anthem is more clearly emperor-centered/emperor-praising, so the same applies to it, if not more so. In essence, singing it is pledging obedience to the Emperor, which is at the crux of the prayer group's appeal. Until now, it was not legally the anthem, so one could ignore it if one wanted to. While the legislation says only that the flag and anthem are the official flag and anthem, and makes no mention of enforcement, there is little doubt that both social and

legal pressure will be brought to bear if the current conservative/reactionary trend continues. This will certainly be true in schools now that the claim that there is no legal basis for the flag and anthem can no longer be made.

3. Passage of legislation allowing "wiretapping" and other electronic surveillance: This was heavily opposed by the non-coalition parties because it raises the specter of pre-World War II secret police suppression of human rights and criticism of government policies, and because the legislation is so fuzzily worded. The telephone company and its union have expressed the desire not to be part of such investigations, so the police will probably be left to themselves to listen to and record whatever they want. The legislation lacks guarantees of the rights of those who are recorded, as well.
4. Passage of legislation giving each Japanese citizen a registration number: On the surface, this is similar to the Social Security number which we use so much in the US for identification. However, it is to be used for the Residence Register (not Family Register) which each citizen has in her/his place of residence. This will allow anyone to get a register copy at any city office which, theoretically, is handy. However, it will also become the key to a great deal of personal information, probably including that in Family Registers. The legislation does not contain any guarantees of privacy protection to limit leaking of such information.

Aside from these, there was talk of passing legislation specifically aimed at the "Aum Truth" religious sect which was responsible for the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack, kidnappings and murders. The group has lost its recognition as a religious body (losing tax-free and legal status), but it is still active and gaining members. The thought that the national government

would pass a law to specifically outlaw a certain religious group is frightening. If the group causes anti-social and/or criminal problems, they ought to be dealt with under existing laws as long as freedom of thought and freedom of belief are guaranteed by the constitution. Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed on this bill and it was not brought to the floor for a vote.

The Yasukuni Shrine issue is covered well in the prayer request. Since the request, there has been more discussion. Since a shrine is a religious place by definition, making it some sort of national organization does not remove its religious nature. There is a national cemetery in Tokyo which could serve the purpose and which is non-religious, but it is not Yasukuni. It is the whole emperor-centered psychology which makes Yasukuni important and which the conservative forces want to make use of. This would most likely be accompanied by the official introduction of revisionist history pushed by the conservative groups. This includes the claim that the Nanking massacre never took place, that "comfort women" are a fiction of the imagination and that Japan's only interest in Korea and China was to free those countries from foreign domination!

I don't know that nationalization would mean instant "shintoization" of Japan. The Buddhists are strongest numerically and will fight any such move along with Christians and new-religions. However, up to the end of World War II, Yasukuni was said to be "cultural" and "non-religious" and, therefore, not in conflict with any religion. That fact was used to force worship of it by any and all in Japan and Japanese territory. Christians were forced into this, or their churches were closed down. The Hinomaru flag was displayed at the front of the church and worship began with, or was preceded by, bowing in the direction of Tokyo in honor to the emperor. No one wants to go through this again, so this is why Yasukuni, as the first

gap in the dike, is such a concern.

On the constitutional revision issue, the present coalition has enough votes to push a revision bill through the diet. It would then have to be ratified by the general public. Since more than half the population has little or no memory of World War II, and since Japan has been in peace since then, the number of people who feel real concern over ending the "peace constitution" decreases daily. The government points to foreign (read US) criticism about Japan's not taking responsibility in "peace keeping" (read Kuwait, Bosnia, etc.) and suggests Japan needs to re-militarize to be a responsible world power. (Does anyone in the US remember militarized Japan and why it now has a "peace constitution?") Whether a revision would pass, though, is a real question.

To sum up, I think the prayer request is a reasonable, if perhaps a bit heated, analysis of the possibilities for a worst case scenario. We are all praying that it won't go that far!