

The Challenge of Articulating the Doctrine of Holiness in Japanese Culture: Japanese Conception of Sin and the Doctrine of Sanctification

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I. Introduction

To the ordinary Japanese, it is hard to understand many doctrines of Christianity. I had difficulty understanding the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. My field is Wesley's Theology. So my role here is to articulate Wesley's theology, especially the doctrine of holiness to Japanese society. In order to do that, we need to discuss how we Japanese understand the concept of sin.

II. Introducing Japan¹

Japan is a land where the values and traditions of the past flourish alongside ideas and practices of the present. It is the eighth most populated nation in the world with millions of people crowded into a relatively small island chain . . . millions of people in a highly technological society, moving fast toward material and secular goals . . . people who need the message of holiness to steer them through the fast track of one of the most advanced industrial nations in the world.

"Materialism" is a key word to describe the Japanese society. Gucci . . . Chanel . . . we live in a money-oriented, brand name culture. Television commercials have convinced us to create an artificial beauty, and so we shun oldness and dirtiness. Psalm 104.24 says, "How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." But our situation is entirely different. Japan is satisfied only with more and more human-made things. We Christians must be careful not to be influenced by secular values. In short, we must have the holiness message to keep us from falling into the errors of our materialistic culture.

"Indifference" is, unfortunately, another key word in our Japanese collective conscience. The most challenging religious threat to Christianity in Japan is not Buddhism or Shintoism but rather indifference to religion. The younger generation flirts with an interest in fanatic religion, but they shun traditional Christianity. In a selfish world, they generally try to avoid relationships with anyone, including Christ and his disciples.

Yet our religious statistics are misleadingly high. A person may go to a Christian church at Christmas or have a chapel wedding because of an admiration for the beautiful traditional wedding garments. The same person may also go to a Shinto shrine to worship on New Year's Day and insist on a Buddhist funeral after he or she dies. As a result of this syncretism, Japanese will respond positively to all these religions in a poll, making our religious population twice our actual population.

Now, in the midst of materialism, selfish indifference, and religious syncretism, we are currently experiencing deep economic recession. After the economic success myth has ended and the bubble has burst, we are finally realizing the need to change our direction. We recognize that we have wasted too

¹Part of this paragraph is taken from my essay, "Holiness Today, 'Steering Through the Japanese Fast Track,'" *Holiness Today* (January 1999), 19.

much food and too much time for temporary joy. We are beginning to realize that we cannot live by ourselves; we must live in relationship with God.

III. Japanese Way of Understanding the Concept of Sin

When we try to think about the doctrine of sanctification, we need to make clear the conception of sin. In order to do that, I would like to start with understanding Japanese Culture.

A. A Culture of Shame

Let me start with a quote from the book called, *Chrysanthemum and Sword*, by Ruth Benedict.² Ms. Benedict wrote this book in 1967 in order to analyze the Japanese mind and to create a strategy for treating the Japanese people.

Ms. Benedict distinguishes culture into two. Western culture is called a “culture of sin.” Japanese culture is called a “culture of shame.” The former consists of an absolute moral standard, so man tries to reach this absolute. The latter has a relative moral standard. The Japanese people are apt to decide their behavior through the judgment of an opponent. So if there are no opponent’s eyes, one can do even an immoral thing. Ms. Benedict believes the Japanese are lacking an absolute moral standard. She says,

A failure to follow their explicit signposts of good behavior, a failure to balance obligations or to foresee contingencies is a shame. Shame, they say, is the root of virtue. A man who is sensitive to it will carry out all the rules of good behavior. A man who knows shame is sometimes translated as a “man of honor.”³

She continues,

Shame has the same place of authority in Japanese ethics that “a clear conscience,” “being right with God,” and the avoidance of sin have in Western ethics. Logically enough, therefore, a man will not be punished in the afterlife. . . . They do not recognize post-death reward or punishment or a heaven and a hell.⁴

Her way of analyzing Japanese mentality is very interesting. This lack of absolute conception of sin will even affect Japanese behavior and moral values.

So relative thinking is a Japanese characteristic. Sometimes it is said that Japanese have always two minds. The most characteristic of this contradiction is connected to this book title. On one hand, the Japanese love to create the most beautiful Chrysanthemum flowers. The Japanese love the arts and the beauty of nature. On the other hand, the Japanese respect swords and honor the Japanese warriors called Samurai. They change their attitudes according to the opponents. Therefore, to cope with the Japanese people is sometimes difficult. Japanese surface thinking and actual thinking are most of the time different. And this is deeply connected to our group-oriented character.

²Benedict, Ruth, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1946).

³Ibid., 224.

⁴Ibid.

B. A Group-Oriented Character

In Japanese society, how does one come to realize one's guilt? One feels guilty when one realizes he or she is betraying one's group. So next we would like to consider "group-oriented" character. If you come to Japan and look inside a company, the rooms have no barriers. All the workers face each other. This is totally different from the individualism of Western culture. Every Japanese needs to belong to some group because the Japanese are afraid of isolation from the group members. Many college students and office workers must participate in drinking parties after school or office work. This is because the fellowship creates oneness inside the group. A group atmosphere decides what way one needs to behave inside the group. So one can say this relationship is not dictator-slave type; it is deeply connected with loyalty, faithfulness, and thankfulness to the boss, and obligation. (An example is that one has to give a return of any congratulatory gift one may receive from a friend. We call it *giri* in Japanese.) These attitudes create negative sides.

1. Because one must follow the group decision, one cannot decide by oneself. One always asks the boss what one should do. Group decisions precede individual decisions.
2. Indifference to or Ignorance of another group. They respect only their own group, so a group easily becomes a sect. A charismatic leader will dominate the group and refuse different types.
3. Each group has its own value and rule only applicable within the group. One needs to behave in accordance with it. Otherwise, one may be punished.

Consequently disobeying the group decisions is considered to be sin against the boss or the other group members. But this does not include any religious/Christian understanding of God. One may feel jealous when someone inside the group is treated better than that person is. Within the group everyone must maintain the status quo of the group. If he or she does not, he or she will be excluded by the rest of the group. Boys or girls in the elementary school may hide their full mark grade because if they say it publicly, they may be excluded by the rest of the class. So we may say this is not actually a "culture of shame," but a "culture of jealousy."

This kind of attitude can affect churches because they are apt to limit their membership to only insiders. It can be a barrier to the evangelism of the church. They are sometimes not open for new people to come. Isn't there any positive side? I believe we can apply it to a small group ministry in every local church. Once new people can be inside this group, they can really contribute to our church. So the pastors need to be careful not to have an exclusive attitude.

C. A Clear Concept of Sin

It is crucial to have a clear concept of sin, especially for Japanese culture. When the Japanese think salvation, they think salvation comes by their own effort. We can call this "self-help" (*jiriki*). Ms. Benedict describes the character of "self-help" as follows. Some of them (Buddhist and Shintoist sects), of which Zen is the paramount example, rely only on "self-help," *jiriki*. The potential Strength, they teach, lies only within oneself, and only by one's effort can one increase it.⁵

This kind of self-power belief is very strong in Japan. What does the Bible say against this? The biblical concept of sin is missing the mark, which means we are not in a right relationship with God. It also means total depravity of the human condition. We have no power to act properly with our own

⁵Ibid., 242. "Zen seeks only the light man can find in himself."

merit in Christianity. We can say that this kind of self-confidence comes from a lack of a clear concept of sin and an absolute God.

Why do the Japanese have only a vague concept of sin? It is because the concept of sin is deeply connected to the doctrine of creation. We think that nature created God rather than that God created nature. This is due to the mild weather in Japan (except the northern part of Japan). Nature has always been a friend and not an enemy to the Japanese. But all Japanese people must understand that God is the creator of humans and that humans are creatures. As creatures we need to worship God. The true meaning of justification comes not by human effort but from God's grace. To realize the existence of an absolute God is difficult for ordinary Japanese, but we need to establish the clear concept of God and sin.

IV. Sanctification

A. The Definition of Sanctification

What is sanctification? Wesley defines sanctification in two ways. One is a "circumstance of sanctification," meaning the way God applies sanctification to us. Wesley stresses the instantaneous and gradual sides of sanctification.⁶ Wesley has an order of salvation. He stresses that salvation begins with prevenient grace and goes on to repentance, justification (new birth), sanctification, Christian perfection and final justification. It needs to develop day by day. It also is an instantaneous work done by the Holy Spirit. The grace of sanctification enables us to be transformed into the image of God. Therefore, Wesley has a subjective view of understanding one's state. He has both time order and cosmological conception. Individual holiness is needed to go on to social holiness. Wesley also stresses the "content of sanctification." The substance means the contents of sanctification, which is "purity of intention, faith works by love."⁷ I believe the content of sanctification is holiness, which means the lifestyle of Christians. Wesley stressed "holiness of heart and life." It is important how we connect individual salvation to life. The inclusiveness and synthesis of individual holiness and social holiness is important.

B. Articulating the Doctrine of Holiness to Our Culture

To articulate the doctrine of holiness, we have to cope with two major barriers of Japanese character.

The first one is the antinomian attitude of the Japanese. Many Buddhists say that grace is from the benevolence of Buddha. Some Japanese claim the result of self-help training as evidence of the grace of God and base their philosophy on the "help of another."⁸ Most Japanese believe they do not need to do anything after they have asked something from God. When they pray to God, they only ask for something they want and they easily forget to thank God. Wesley saw that Calvinism had a

⁶John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. 14 vols., edited by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint ed., Kansas City, MO.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 7:329-29, hereafter cited as *Works*.

⁷*Works* 11:444. "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," §27.

⁸Benedict, op.cit., 242.

danger of antinomianism and only stressed imputed righteousness. Wesley stressed the human role in salvation while emphasizing God's initiative. Wesley stressed not only imputed righteousness but also imparted righteousness. I believe this balance is very important. So it is important for us to teach God's initiative and human responsibility. And it will lead to a true understanding of sanctification.

The second barrier is the way to introduce holiness doctrine. When the doctrine of sanctification was introduced to Japan, it was introduced in a way that only stressed inward holiness. The emphasis was on the holiness state rather than the sanctification process. So it was introduced as a kind of ascetic type. Many pastors were taught this wonderful doctrine only in a disciplinary way. Too much stress on the state of holiness causes us to forget the true relationship with Christ. The Japanese also have a tendency to measure one's state by comparing one's position with the opponent and are apt to forget the true aim of becoming Christ-like. It has caused much misunderstanding of Wesley's doctrine and also has caused a lot of negative feelings towards sanctification. It also has caused another serious problem. We lost the connection with Wesleyan-Armenian theology. We are still captive to German theology. This kind of approach is presenting only the first half of the doctrine of sanctification.

Wesley stressed that the image of God is created inside us to bring us to transformation. So our aim should be to transform ourselves to the image of God by the grace of God. And this transformation should occur not only in individual hearts but also in our life. This will lead to a social holiness.

In this sense, I would like to stress the role of the means of grace. Wesley had two means of grace. One is "works of piety" and the other is "works of mercy." "Works of piety" mean scripture reading, prayer, receiving Holy Communion, and reading spiritual books. "Works of mercy" mean responsible activities including acts of mercy. What is necessary to go on to perfection from "works of piety" to "works of mercy" and to have an inclusive understanding?

I believe it is the sacrament of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a bridge between two works. Wesley understood Holy Communion as a means to bring acknowledgment of the sin and give one a sense of repentance and conversion and let him go on in the process of sanctification. In this way, all believers know where and in what position they are standing. I believe Wesley understood Holy Communion as a place to confirm one's sure salvation. The presentations of inclusive understandings of individual and social sanctification are key to articulating the doctrine to Japanese culture.

V. Conclusion

In order to articulate the doctrine of holiness to our culture, I believe a clear concept of sin is necessary. Once a Japanese becomes a Christian, he or she has a drastic change in his or her conception of God, creation and sin. This change may bring us to separate from other people and the Japanese way of understanding sin. This God is not a compromising God, but he transforms us into having holiness of heart and life. God gives us the ability to be responsible. Christ gives his life to us; we can and must devote ourselves to God and people around us.

In all of this analysis of my culture, I am reminded of the Hebrew word *sharem*, which means "wholly" or "completely." It also means "a part of a pot." In the Hebrew world, when people discovered a piece of a pot that could be created into a whole pot, they named it *sharem*. Though we are not perfect in a sinless sense, we are *sharem*, we have the possibility of becoming holy by the power

of God. Through His Holy Spirit we can enter a process of sanctification. This is the answer for Japan. We Nazarenes in Japan are sharing God's love with our neighbors. We live to become peacemakers and to bring the holiness message not only to individual hearts but also to our society. We join as partners with all Nazarene churches around the world. Let us express holiness by creating peace and wholeness and responding to God's sanctifying grace.