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Adventism in the Context of Japanese Culture

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By Junko Nakai

In the beginning was the Word” is a central belief of Christians. However, this is a foreign concept within Japanese culture. *Fugen Jikko* (no words, only deeds) eloquently expresses society’s values in Japan. The trustworthiness of words is judged not by the words in and of themselves, but by the status and trustworthiness of the speaker. Words are regarded and treated lightly, whereas the committed human relationship is believed to be fundamental to one’s existence in society.

Compared with Western countries, Japan has an ideology that gives much higher status to awareness of one’s position in a group than to individual self-expression or self-assertion. In Japan, human relationships are vital: the first, the last, and the most important part of one’s life within society. At the core of Japanese society is an underlying group consciousness. In Japan’s earlier agrarian society, this group consciousness was recognized by the concept of *ie*, literally, “the household.” Actually, the word meant more than that: “a corporate residential group,” or the managing body of the premodern enterprise.¹

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan shifted from feudal agrarianism to a modern industrial and technical society.² The concept of *ie* was used by employers and community leaders in the establishment of corporations and other urban institutions. The interaction between an individual and the larger group in such organizations is based on both loyalty and a high degree of emotional involvement. Nakane Chie explains:

This emotional approach is facilitated by continual human contact of the kind that can often intrude on those human relations which belong to the completely private and personal sphere. Consequently, the power and influence of the group not only affects and enters into the individual’s actions; it alters even his ideas and ways of thinking. Individual autonomy is minimised.³

Although modern Japanese society is undergoing radical change, group consciousness known as *uchi* (the colloquial term for *ie*), still

persists on various levels of society. Employees refer to their own company as *uchi*. The group recognized as *uchi*, to which loyalty is owed, can be a family, a class or school, a village, a town, an organization, an institution, a company or, indeed, Japan itself.

In Japanese society, there is a clear hierarchy inside the group. The group comprises accumulated vertical relationships of pairs that consist of two persons in a senior-junior relationship. The senior takes care of the junior, and the junior recognizes *On* (or indebtedness) and repays the senior with *Chusei* (loyalty). "*On* in all cases signifies a load, an indebtedness, a burden, which one carries as best one may."⁴ A sense of unity is achieved by every member fulfilling the role based on this "vertical principle," as expected within the framework of society.⁵ Harmony is the ultimate virtue, and consensus is the principle of decision making.⁶

In such a society, individual identity is subservient to that of the group. Usually the values and judgment of the head of the *ie* are unanimously accepted. In such an environment, it is extremely difficult for any member of the group, especially one of junior position, to make a stand distinct from the consensus of the group.

Employees who keep the Sabbath or abstain from alcohol can be regarded as stepping out of this *uchi* group and lose their position in society.⁷ This brings a conflict—between a person's old and new identity, between one's old *uchi* identity and new Adventist identity. The *ie* system and Christianity are inherently incompatible.⁸

Another aspect of Christianity foreign to Japanese culture is the concept of monotheism. Christians worship the One True God and consider the worship of any other god idolatry. Such exclusiveness, such a clear distinction between good and evil and right and wrong, is foreign to the Japanese mindset. The Japanese prefer unity to dichotomy, mixed colors to primary colors. They prefer harmony to confrontation between the righteous and the evil. Japanese people are tolerant of religious syncretism.

Many Japanese homes have both a Buddhist altar and a Shinto shrine. In accepting Christianity, some Japanese have simply absorbed it into their belief system along with their other religious beliefs, or consciously selected only whatever elements suit them or their lifestyle. However, the Adventist emphasis on the significance of in-depth Bible study and absorption of God's Word into all aspects of a believer's life does not sit easily with an eclectic approach to religious beliefs.

Although concepts such as monotheism and

Sabbath observance are entirely alien to the Japanese mindset, there are many examples of how societal and cultural prejudices are changed and overcome through immersion in God's Word.

Take the example of Murata Wakasa, a high-ranking samurai leader of the frontier guard in southern Japan in the 1860s. Local fishermen brought him an English New Testament that they had found floating in the sea. Intrigued by the book, Murata made inquiries and found that it was part of the Christian Bible. He purchased a Chinese version to read. He sent a man to a Christian missionary in Nagasaki, ostensibly to procure books, but in reality to acquire answers to his many questions.

He was convinced that what he read was true. When he requested baptism, he was warned about the political and social risk involved, since Christianity was still strictly prohibited in Japan. Nevertheless, he was determined to follow Jesus. He said: "Sir, I cannot tell you my feelings when I first read the account of Jesus' character. I had never heard of such a person. I was filled with admiration, overwhelmed with emotion and taken captive by His nature and life."⁹

Murata's encounter with Jesus took place over the pages of the Bible. What about Adventists? It is by being "People of the Book" that Adventists have advantage over other Japanese Christians. By absorption of God's Word through in-depth Bible Study and by daily reading of the Sabbath School lesson quarterly, a Japanese person can start to understand the importance of monotheism and observance of the Ten Commandments.

In a society that has no absolute values to follow, biblical teachings give Adventists a solid foundation upon which to base their judgment and ethical and moral decisions. In a society where traditionally words are treated lightly, the Word of God emerges in the minds of the believers and earnest seekers for the Truth as a solid foundation.¹⁰ Biblical words work hand in hand with a Christian life and witness and are vital for the absorption of Adventist doctrines in Japanese society.

In 1889, Abram La Rue, an Adventist pioneer literature evangelist to the Far East, visited Japan to distribute English literature. The owner of an inn in Yokohama, where he stayed for two weeks, was so impressed by La Rue's humble Christian personality that he said, "If your Church is built here, I will become a member."¹¹ This seems to be the prototype of the Japanese perception of, and often motivation for, conversion to Christianity. For

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Japanese people, Christianity is strongly identified with the character and lives of those who carry the message. The message of Christ is not viewed in isolation, separate from the messengers.¹²

In 1896, W. C. Grainger, the first Seventh-day Adventist missionary, arrived in Japan, accompanying his student, T. H. Okohira. Grainger gave Bible studies to young Japanese people, stating, "We are endeavoring

1943, all Adventist pastors and elders (forty-two in number) were arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated, and four were martyred. All church property was seized, and mission work came to a halt.²⁰

Contemporary Japanese society is strongly secular. Religious education has been forbidden in public schools in Japan since 1899, a position upheld during the American reorganization of the education system in 1945.

The trustworthiness of words is judged not by the words in and of themselves, but by the status and trustworthiness of the speaker.

to teach the Bible, and not any particular doctrine, except as it comes up in our lessons."¹³ His approach combined with his "Godly character" attracted many who had no background knowledge of Christianity.¹⁴

In 1899, Grainger and Okohira established a monthly journal, *Owari no Fukuin* (The Gospel for the Last Days). The content of the magazine focused on biblical doctrines and the health message. The magazine related biblical prophecies to wars and other current world events, drawing the readers' attention to the fulfillment of prophecy. The key message was: "Come out of Babylon" and prepare for the Last Days, which were at hand. It is questionable whether the call to "Come out of Babylon" (that is, Sunday-keeping churches) was relevant, let alone effective, in a society where more than 99 percent of the population was non-Christian.¹⁵

Late in the nineteenth century, Protestant churches presented themselves as a unified Japanese Christian Church.¹⁶ In 1873, through their concerted efforts, the ancient Prohibitory Edict against Christianity was lifted, opening the door widely and publicly for Christian mission work in Japan. The next decade saw the completion of the Japanese Bible translation as the fruit of their joint efforts. By emphasizing a distinctive message, the Adventist Church was criticized for stealing members from other churches.¹⁷

In the 1930s, another conflict arose when the government, as a part of the militarism of the day, enforced emperor worship as an expression of the nation's gratitude for his On.¹⁸ Buddhists and Christians, whose teachings were thought to threaten the militarism of the day, had been persecuted since the late 1920s.¹⁹ Those who believed in simple Adventism became the victims of an intensified persecution. In

In a 1973 survey entitled "The youth of the world, the youth of Japan," the following response was given to the question, "Do you have a religious commitment?" Four out of five Japanese youths had no religious beliefs. Seventy-four percent replied that they had no interest in religion.²¹ In the words of Mori Mikisaburou, Japan is a haven for atheists.²² Yet, as with other cultures, there is a common yearning to know what the future holds and to find what meaning life holds. Many popular magazines aimed at Japanese youth today invariably have columns dedicated to fortune-telling.²³

As stated above, Japanese people focus on people rather than abstract ideas. In this setting, Adventism's interaction with Japanese society has affected the way in which Adventists portray themselves. Shimada Masumi, director of evangelism for the Japanese Union Conference once encountered an earnest seeker who pleaded with him: "Please reveal the Life of Christ living in you." He concluded that the ultimate task of evangelism was not to provide evangelistic programs, but to nurture Adventists who can answer this ardent need of people to see Christ reflected in their character and lives.²⁴

The Adventist Church has also had to respond to this need on an institutional level. In the 1970s, the *Signs of the Times* radically changed its editorial strategy, shifting its focus from a discussion among Adventists to a dialogue with other Christian writers. *Signs of the Times* is now the best-selling Christian magazine for non-Christians in Japan.²⁵ However, the Church in Japan, as in other countries, has long taken a holistic approach to evangelism. The medical ministry has been the right arm of the Church from the early days. A Seventh-day Adventist college and the

Tokyo Sanitarium Hospital were both established in the 1920s. Following Ellen White's leading, the early missionaries, along with their Japanese converts, set out to minister to the needs of the society around them.

This change in editorial strategy symbolizes the diversified approaches taken by the Japanese Adventist Church in the postwar era. In order to meet the people where they are, various approaches have been taken, as the Church also attempts to cater to the community's diverse needs. For example, Adventists take a leading role in nonsmoking campaigns and have successfully spearheaded a campaign to introduce nonsmoking carriages in Japan's famous bullet trains.²⁶

An integrated approach to presenting the Adventist message as a total—and attractive—life and lifestyle package can be seen in a number of ways in Japan. What makes Adventism attractive to the eyes of nonbelievers? Shraishi Takashi, the present editor of the *Signs of the Times*, believes the goal in presenting the Adventist message should be “To present every doctrine as gospel, including the ones distinctive to Adventism. If we can present examples of happy Christian lives, keeping the

Sabbath, happy precisely because of keeping the Sabbath, it will be the strong witness.”²⁷

The Adventist Church in Japan believes the answer to this question is to continue catering to the common needs of humanity, in providing places where all can meet; happy Adventist homes; hospitals and health centers; vegetarian restaurants and cookery classes; college, schools, and kindergartens for a well-balanced education; volunteer social services; outreach over the Internet and other media; and hospices and homes for the aged.²⁸ Through these efforts, the core values of Adventism can be portrayed.

Perhaps in this regard, Japanese Adventists have something to offer Adventists of other countries. People everywhere are crying out to see Christ lived in us and through us, but perhaps that voice is a little louder in Japan.

In conclusion, the Japanese way of perceiving Christianity is by identifying it with those who profess it. Living in a society where human relationships are of utmost importance, Japanese people are keenly sensitive to—and per-

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When the Bells Toll

By Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson

Winters were dry and cold in Yokohama. Lawns turned a brittle, frost-bitten brown, and the sky was a cold, white backdrop behind the glittering facades of pay-by-the-hour love hotels that lined Highway 16. On the other side of the highway from the love hotels lay a vast expanse of black soil that in the spring would be planted with root vegetables. And beyond those fields, on a small hill fenced in by wild bamboo, stood our house, one among four houses that comprised the Adventist missionary compound.

Constructed to American scale but logistically unfit for Japanese weather and the cost of living, our large, drafty house had, at its heart, a wood stove that at best heated the central living room alone. I was nine when we moved to Japan, and I remember that we caught colds again and again that first winter until we learned to dress for the weather and for the house. Our seeming physical frailties were only symptoms of the other demons we faced during those first few months in a new country: the language barrier, culture shock,

politics, and changing family dynamics.

We were Christians in a country where less than 2 percent of the population was Christian; we were Americans—of Japanese descent, but Americans nonetheless—in a largely homogenous culture; we were trying to find our place in the land of my father's ancestors and my mother's immediate family. It was harder than we had ever imagined, perhaps harder than we could even admit to ourselves. I think there were many times that first year when we wanted to start all over again.

As our first New Year's in Japan approached, I remember my mother recalling and resurrecting traditions and rituals that she had practiced as a child growing up in the suburbs of Tokyo. More than twenty years had passed since my mother had left Japan as a teenager, and now she passed on these traditions to my brother and me for the first time.

For dinner on New Year's Eve, my mother cooked *toshi-koshi soba*, buckwheat noodles in a savory broth. “For long life,” she explained. We sat down at a dark-wood table, just the four of us—all four of us—and ate to long life. The house was cold; the fire never

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ceptive about—human character. Since the Second World War, the Adventist Church has changed its evangelical focus to a diversified approach aimed at catering to the diverse needs of the Japanese people. This approach has led to greater recognition of Adventism within Japanese society. For Japanese people in particular, the essential method of absorbing Adventist Christianity is through study of the Bible and the personal experience of a Christ-filled life.

The future of Adventism in Japan lies in continuing to take an integrated approach in which every doctrine is presented as gospel. In a society where latent group consciousness persists and where individual autonomy is minimized, the most effective way to lead a person to an encounter with Christ is through the example of a Christian life and character, through a quiet personal witness of Christ's love living within.

Notes and References

1. Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 4, 8, 10.
2. During the Meiji Restoration, which occurred in 1867,

ruling power in Japan was returned to the emperor from the Shogunate. At the same time, Japan started to experience a period of radical modernization through a rapid succession of dramatic reforms that established a centralized government and opened Japan to Western civilization. The intellect and influence behind these reforms was a missionary, Guido F. Verbeck, of the American Dutch Reformed Mission. Verbeck had won the confidence of Japanese leaders as a trustworthy advisor through his Christian character and conduct. He became an advisor to the Japanese Privy Council, invited by former pupils, to whom he had taught in early 1860s the U.S. Constitution and New Testament Bible as the foundation of American civilization. Archibald McLean, *Epoch Makers of Modern Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revel, 1912); and James I. Godd, *Famous Missionaries of the Reformed Church* (n.p.: Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1903). See also, W. E. Griffis, "Verbeck of Japan: Citizen of No Country," archives of the American Dutch Reformed Mission, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Rutgers University.

3. Nikane Chie, *Japanese Society*, 10.
4. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1947), 101.
5. Modern Japanese society is stratified vertically, and inside each organization, or ie, vertical principles are at work in accordance with the hierarchy within the group. See Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society*, 23-60.
6. See Crown Prince Shotoku, Seventeen Injunctions to the Ruling Class, written in A.D. 604.
7. Within the last decade, Japanese society has undergone

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burned hot enough, but as the warm broth filled our bellies, our spirits were strong. *Here we are in a new country, with exciting new traditions and foods and people all around us. We've survived the first few months. All the future lies ahead of us. Anything is possible.*

We did not know then how almost anything *would* happen—how the coming years would so radically mold our family and challenge us on many levels—how we would come out of Japan different people than when we had arrived—how we would grow older and softer inside and maybe a little more scarred on the outside. But at that moment, that first New Year's in Japan, everything was simple and new. Something like a Sabbath rest had fallen over Japan. Families all over Japan came together like ours to eat long-life noodles that night. It was a time for renewal, for fresh beginnings.

In preparation for the holiday, houses all across Japan had been repaired and cleaned inside and out; debts had been repaid; worn garments had been replaced. Stores had closed their books and doors for the year. Three days worth of symbolic New Year's dishes had been prepared in advance; each dish signified something auspicious, such as good health, fertility, good harvest,

happiness, or long life.

And when the clock struck midnight on New Year's Eve, the ritual of purification rang out across Japan. Through the dark, starless night came the haunting sound of temple bells echoing across the land—over the black fields and city lights and love hotels, over our small missionary compound. All across Japan, the temple bells tolled exactly one hundred and eight times. Man has a hundred and eight sins, according to Buddhism, and hearing the deep ring of these gongs is said to purify him from his transgressions of the past year.

It's a beautiful symbol, I think. I know that we needed those bells that first New Year's in Japan. In those first few months in our new home, we had—although no more or less than at any past or future time—already sinned against each other in small, unseen ways. Seeds of hurt and growing apart had been planted. We had wounded each other unsuspectingly and carelessly. We needed to be purified, to forgive and to be forgiven—a little foot-washing of the soul. As much as anyone else, we needed to be cleansed sin by sin, a hundred and eight times over, at least.

The bells were healing that night. I was lulled into sleep by their rhythmic song.

further radical changes. Since the introduction of a two-day weekend, Sabbath observance has been less of a problem for Japanese believers. However, the pressure to conform is still present.

8. Katsumi Nakamura also pointed out this incompatibility in *Kindai Bunka no Kozo, Kirisuto-kyo to Kindzi* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1995), 356-57. Some historians believe that this inherent incompatibility actually had a positive effect on Japan, as it played a symbolic role in liberating individuals from the ie system during the Meiji Era. Suzuki Norihisa, "Juyo no Shoso," *Nihon Shukyo Jiten* (Tokyo: Koubundo, 1985), 549.

9. As the source of this story, see McLean, *Epoch Makers*, 258-64; and Godd, *Famous Missionaries*, 254-56. As an Adventist example, during the interrogation by police inspectors during the Second World War, Sadamitsu Morita, elder of the Hiroshima church, answered all questions by referring to biblical texts. When he was summoned to court, the investigation document was 10 cm thick, full of biblical texts. Interview with Mrs. Morita for Voice of Prophecy radio program.

10. For example, consider remarkably influential Christian leaders like Uchimura Kanzo and Yanaihara Tadao. Yanaihara's solitary protest against the war with China, which he supported with biblical texts, was a symbol of Christian conscience backed up by biblical values. He was expelled from the Imperial University of Tokyo, but welcomed back after Japan's defeat in the Second World War. He later served as the president of the University of Tokyo.

11. Tsumoru Kajiyama, *Shimei ni Moete* (Yokohama: Japan Publishing House, 1982), 158.

12. On this point, J. Liggins, the first Protestant missionary to land in Japan, stated in a letter to the

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Twenty years have passed since that first New Year's in Japan. Over the years, I have heard the New Year's bells tolling a half dozen times or more. Now my brother and I are more or less grown up. My parents have completed their missionary service in Japan, and ultimately all of us returned to America, where at New Year's we join other Americans in greeting the coming year with fireworks and fanfare. We uncork bottles of fizzy apple juice and kiss each other with abandon when the clock strikes midnight.

All this joyous uproar is beautiful in its own way, but as I wearily make my way to bed during the first few moments of the New Year, I sometimes find myself listening for the quiet tolling of the temple bells. No matter where I am or how old I've grown, I am always in need of a little cleansing, a little forgiveness—a hundred and eight times over, at least.

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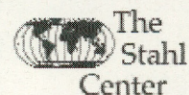
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home mission in the United States in August 1861: "Living epistles of Christianity are as much needed in Japan as written ones." *Spirit of Missions*, Aug. 1861. Guido F. Verbeck explained the change in attitude of the Japanese toward Christianity from initial prejudice and hostility to understanding and trust: "The Protestant Missionaries, as a body, had gained the confidence and respect of the people. . . . [Their] gaining of the people's confidence was a consequence, under the blessing of God, of the patient labor, the Christian character and conduct, and the teaching of the missionaries themselves, . . . the nature of Christianity being naturally identified by the Japanese with the character and lives of those who had come to bear it to them. Verbeck, "History of Protestant Missions in Japan," Proceedings of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of Japan, held at Osaka, Japan, April 1883, in *Proceedings of the General Conference of Protestant Missionaries in Japan Held in Tokyo October 24-31, 1900* (Tokyo: Methodist Publishing House, 1901), 754.

A survey of motivations for conversions in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) indicates that Christian ethics, such as honesty, diligence, patience, loving care, good behavior, and sincerity, were the most appealing factors. *Nihon Shukyo Jiten* (Tokyo: Koubundo, 1985), 558.

13. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 27, 1897. The Shiba English Bible School was established in 1898.

14. Kuniya Shu's words, recorded in his diary and quoted by Kajiyama in *Shimei ni Moete*.

15. Because this journal was the only literature published by the Adventists in the early days in Japan, it inevitably carried the full weight of the responsibility for conveying the Adventist message, including the Church's distinctive doctrines.

16. "The Church of Christ in Japan" was established in 1872 by Japanese members baptized by missionaries of several denominations. *Nihon Protestant Dendo-shi*, 1:65. Unification of the Protestant churches was further institutionalized by the military-led government during the Second World War.

17. In Verbeck, "History of Protestant Missions in Japan," however, the Seventh-day Adventists have a detailed entry of one page.

18. "On" is always used in this sense of limitless devotion when it is used to show one's first and greatest indebtedness, one's

"Imperial On." Benedict, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 101.

19. W. G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), 185-86.

20. One result of this investigation, however, was recognition of Adventism by E. Kinoshita, the leading thought police inspector (*tokka*, under the Home Ministry) in charge of investigating of Seventh-day Adventists. He confessed, "If Christianity is based on the Bible and Christian Church is the people who believe in the Bible, the Seventh-Day Adventist is the real Christian Church. However, now when Japan is fighting a war, the people with such belief must be imprisoned." Private communication with Toshio Yamagata. So impressed was Kinoshita with the Christian character of an Adventist science teacher, T. Yamagata, that he sent his two sons to be educated at the Adventist Mission College. Private communication with C. Kinoshita, E. Kinoshita's daughter-in-law.

21. Survey by the Prime Minister's Office, in Toshio Yamagata, *Jinsei no Sentaku* (Yokohama: Japan Publishing House, 1978), 18.

22. *Ibid.*, 20.

23. In another survey conducted in 1973 and 1978, a conspicuous increase in the younger generation's interest and belief in secular mystic objects, such as miracles and fortune-telling, was reported, in addition to a general trend of increasing interest in gods or Buddha. Survey on sex, religion, and nationalism by Nihon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), Japan's national broadcasting company.

24. Masumi Shimada, "Dendo no Genten (The fundamental principles of evangelism)," *Adventist Life*, Feb. 1999. In his article, Shimada quoted words of Warren Hilliard from a class of his in evangelism: "(The goal of) evangelism is (to prepare) the people." (Translation by the present writer.) Hilliard had reported at the second business session of the Hokkaido Mission in 1968 that the baptisms of the mission in the past were the result, not of public evangelism, but of "the witness of friends and relatives who were Christians." Hilliard, "Hokkaido Holds a Camp Meeting in Japan," *Far Eastern Outlook*, Aug. 1968, 5-6. See also, Yamagata Masao, *Light Dawns Over Asia* (Philippines: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 1990), q.v. "Japan," 47.

25. Takeda Tetsuzo, a priest in the Japanese Episcopal Church, has recommended it as a wonderful magazine, and it outsells all other Christian magazines. Private communication with Hirota Minoru, under whose editorship the journal shifted its approach.

26. As chair of the National Non-Smoking Association, an Adventist pastor led the successful effort.

27. Shiraishi Takashi, former president of the Japan Union Conference, was interviewed in December 2001.

28. The Japanese population is rapidly aging; one out of four people in Japan is older than sixty-five.

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