

## FLUID OPPORTUNITY— MINISTRY IN “POSTMODERN?” JAPAN

### Abstract

There are many ways of viewing the postmodern scenario in Japan. Some see Japan as pre-modern—as latently archaic and never actually having achieved the status of modernity. Others see Japan as always being somewhat postmodern. And some others view Japan as a mixture both, or perhaps even transcending both. The first section of this study looks further into these varied designations of the contemporary culture.

It has been said that in Japan, literature has taken the role of philosophy. If this is true, then perhaps the most valid cultural hermeneutic in understanding Japan’s situation is in the field of fiction writing. Thus, the second part of this paper traces some of the lineage and trends of the Japanese novel, to help gain an understanding of the paradigmatic narrative of Japan and further the understanding of its dialogue with postmodernism.

The third part of this paper addresses the ministry of the Church in this unique setting. As Japan reverts from an imported persona, the Church of Japan may benefit in reconsidering its identity as well. The two basic changes considered are: “The Japan Narrative” into “The God Narrative”, and the entering of the Church into “The God Experience.”

### INTRODUCTION

The unique blend of openness and closedness makes Japan a fascinating and often frustrating place for Christian endeavors. There are few places with easier access and opportunity, and at the same time, few places that have offered such challenge. However, present day Japan is in the tide of rapid alterations, and perhaps returning to a dormant identity. The scope of this essay is to consider where Japan stands with regards to postmodernism, identify current paradigmatic shifts, and outline measures to be taken by the Church in order to touch such a Japan with new life.

## JAPAN AND THE “POSTMODERN” DESIGNATION

### Hi-tech Pre-modern?

Pre-war Japan encountered the modernization of the West with a mixture of fascination and reservation. It is perhaps this situation, which complicates defining just where Japan is in the process. Some consider Japan highly modern, however, there are many who argue that Japan never quite achieved modern status. They point to the evidence that Japan’s modernity is imitative, imbalanced, and incomplete. They will also insist that while Japan has achieved great modernization of economy and administration, it is lopsided with a backward legal and political culture. Could one consider such an imbalance of development modern?

### Playful Postmodern?

Then there is another view that considers Japan as always having been somewhat postmodern. A postmodern society that has, let us say, played with modernity. This view, interestingly, is almost the reverse of the belief that global postmodernism is merely an epoch within the episode of modernity. But there is much to suggest that Japan has been, or emanated postmodern/pre-modern qualities all along. Clammer gives detail to this view, “indeed it could be argued that in some sense Japan has always been a ‘postmodern’ society—one in which the ‘meta-narratives’ have never been important, a true culture of feeling in which capitalist consumption is itself turned into an art form, in which aesthetics is central and in which emphasis on context creates the very relativism so characteristic of postmodernity.”<sup>1</sup>

Both today and far back into the history of Japan we find that distinctive features of Japanese tradition are the centrality of aesthetics, the emphasis of contextuality, and a pluralistic interpretation of orthodoxy. It was this very hostility toward logic and rationalism that has been an embarrassment for many native philosophers. Maruyama Masao believed that the dominant feature of Japanese tradition was the “absence of structure—that is was an indiscriminate juxtaposition of the archaic, modern, and super modern elements.”<sup>2</sup>

Even in recent history we see currents in Japan that echo the postmodern heart and yet pre-date the Western arrival. Miyazawa Kenji, a children’s storywriter, famous for the animated movie of his story *The Night on the Galaxy Railway* (*Ginga Tetsudo no Yoru*), wrote a treatise titled “Outline of the Essentials of Peasant Art” from which the following is taken,

“I wish to hold discussion where there is communion among the facts of modern science, the experiments of the seekers of truth, and our intuition.

One person’s happiness cannot be realized unless all the world is happy.

The awareness of the ego starts with the individual and gradually evolves to that of the group, the society, and then the universe<sup>46</sup>

The new age is headed in a direction in which the world shall be one and will become a living entity.

To live strong and true is to become aware of the galaxy within ourselves<sup>46</sup>

Let us search for true happiness of the world- the search for the path is in itself the path.<sup>35</sup>

Though the writing sounds very present day, it was written in 1926.

Another example of Japan's seemingly postmodern identity, in the midst of even the great postwar struggle to modernize, is captured in the words of architect Kurokawa Kisho. In 1959 Kurokawa began voicing his "metabolism movement", which was a "life principle" as opposed to the dominant "machine principle" portrayed in architecture. He explains that, "The age of life principle is an age of relations. In that age, what governs all is the way of placement and relation rather than the actual substance of things. Such relations are not fixed and stable, but are always changing in response to passing time, the processes of growth, and the exterior environment. It is the age of an adaptable uncertainty, a dynamic stability, or a dynamic order."<sup>35</sup> And elsewhere he states, "life (principle) represents an age of pluralism."<sup>35</sup>

#### Beyond Modern?

Finally, there are those who view Japan as containing a quality that is beyond modern. Karatani explains that the reason there was an element that resisted modernity was not a pre-modern condition, but something, which in a sense was transcending the modern.

This is the challenge one faces when aiming to label the society in Japan. Japan has had a definite modern element, but likely this has been an imported distortion that has never really existed in its heart. On the other hand Japan seems to be a slightly different twist on the postmodern paradigm that the West is getting acquainted with. If anything, it is this surge of the postmodern idea in the West, which has merely served to expose elements that were already at the core of Japan all along. Whatever the case, for the Westerner, the postmodern definition seems to fit Japan quite well, and perhaps the Japanese can begin to take pride in being, somewhat, ahead of the global shift.

#### CULTURAL HERMENEUTIC OF THE CONTEMPORARY "NOVEL"<sup>35</sup>

It is said that, "In Japan literature took over the role of philosophy."<sup>35</sup> There seems to be a sense in which the narrative style, the nuance, and the unvoiced feel of the

writing is what has communicated to the heart and unified Japan as an entity. People have a sense of who they are, and a sense of being a part of “we Japanese” (*warera nihonjin*), though they may not be able to voice in words even remotely what that means. But one can begin to grasp the “philosophy” of existence through the shared stories, the storehouse of literature, a body of literature that has characteristically dripped with the essence of “postmodernism.” €35

Miyoshi Masao explains that the lineage of Japan’s fiction today can be traced back to the Edo Period, a period of literary forms taking shape in *kabuki* and *gesaku*. *Gesaku* fiction is parody, torn between accepting restrictions and the contesting them as well. Though it was considered a decadent literature, it also contains a postmodern sense in its playful sophistication. Other literary forms such as *monogatari*, *nikki*, *noh*, *renga*, and others also had their influence in the evolution of the Japanese novel.

This unique background has formed the Japanese *shosetsu* (“novel”) into quite a different literary form from its Western counterpart. The plot of the *shosetsu* is open ended and spacious. The characters seem to inhabit space unbothered by life’s constraints. It is the “expression not of order and suppression, as the novel is, but of space, decentralization, and dispersal.” €35 is honest, intimate, and often a mere reporting of daily routine. The *shosetsu* is often published in a serialized form, with an unplanned, unfolding narrative, and in both the writing and reading of the work there is a merging with others. This evolving and free quality, as well as the communal bonding aspect of the *shosetsu* fits well with what the West views as postmodern.

This is not to say that Japanese novelists committed to a modernistic style are non-existent. One staunch modernist who bemoans the style of many newer writers is Nobel Prize laureate Oe Kenzaburo. Another interesting paradox is the powerhouse novelist, the late Mishima Yukio. Though Mishima was obsessed with harsh politics, militaristic endeavors, and a violent protest by self-disembowelment wrote in a way that described true beauty as nothingness. He was an intriguing and vicious joining of the modern and postmodern.

. Two landmark books in “postmodern” fiction published in the ‘80’s have quite a different feel. Miyazawa Haruki’s *A Wild Sheep Chase* (*Hitsuji wo Meguru Boken*) is the story of a man who drifts from event to event, living in the present and continually contemplating the past, but without any sense of arriving at meaning or reasons. It is life lived, and the meaning seems to be the path of living it. The other work is Tanaka Yasuo’s infamous bestseller, *Somehow, Crystal* (*Nantonaku Kurisutaru*). The book has been highly criticized as it serves more as a consumers guide to pop culture and chic restaurants than as literature. The vacuousness of its plot, and its

compulsive attraction to name brands are a significant statement about culture.

Many contemporary fiction writers have been taken with the theme of digression. As the capitalist economy sours in contemporary Japan, there is much writing to convey it is becoming “progressively more infantile.”<sup>8</sup> Two of Japan’s leading postmodernists follow this theme in their writing; they are Shimizu Yoshinori and Shimada Masahiko. In *Growing Down (Guroingu Daun)*, Shimizu writes in a way that everyday is not tomorrow, but yesterday, “All I can say now is that I like the way things are now. We’re getting poorer, but that doesn’t bother me. And it feels great to keep getting younger.”<sup>9</sup> In *The Legend of Saint Akahito (Sei Akahito Den)* Shimada describes businessmen and secretaries indulging in rampant mud pie fights and the conversion of the World into a jumbo amusement park called the “Nonsense Zone”.

Shimada also delves into bazaar themes, which seek to break down barriers. In *Dream Messenger (Yumetsuki)* the barriers of self and others are dissolved. One of the characters is a bisexual, bicultural, bilingual, prostitute seeking to bridge all gaps and make all happy. In *Rococo-cho* the barriers of reality and dream are broken as the protagonist flies over Tokyo, eavesdropping on pigeons conversations, is inhaled by people, rides telephone lines and electric waves and enters into others dreams.

As much as Oe Kenzaburo may bemoan the “decaying” of Japanese literature, there is something to be said about the new writers like Yoshimoto Banana. In her eroticizing the mundane, domesticating the marginal, and hopeful quest for the spiritual, not only has she had even entire issues of prestigious and scholarly journals dedicated to her work, and young as she is, she has sold in the tens of millions.

## CHURCH FOR TODAY’S JAPAN

The Christian community in Japan is also in an era of change. It, just like the surrounding culture is beginning to realize its real identity as opposed to its weary, imported persona. Here we will examine two key issues, which will likely determine not only the balance and health of the church, but also the influence it will wield. The first issue is fitting The Japan Narrative into The God Narrative. The second is entering into The God Experience.

### The Japan Narrative into The God Narrative

The Church of Japan has not sufficiently reconciled the Japan and God narratives. For the average person there is a seeming great divide between these two stories. Often one will hear the words, “We Japanese are not Christian” (*Wareware nihonjin wa kurisuchan de wa nai.*) This basic myth is likely at the root of resistance to

the Church, the Bible, and the Gospel. In other words, the Nipponese Identity myth states that, “Since I am Japanese, I am not Christian. If I were to become a Christian, I might no longer be Japanese.” But surely the blood of countless thousands of Japanese Christians proves the folly of that mindset. Perhaps no church in history has endured such long term holocaust as the Church of Japan—in 1637 alone, over 37,000 believers were slaughtered.<sup>10</sup> Surviving two hundred and fifty years of onslaught is a rugged testimony of the truth, which can weave the Japan Narrative into the God Narrative.

There have been voices in the past that spoke effectively to this need. The late novelist Miura Ayako’s stories impacted a vast portion of society, including her rendering of *Shiokari Pass (Shiokari Toogei)*. We can also look forward to movies like “Jesus is My Boss” (*Oyabun wa Iesusama*) (starting September 2001) which tells the salvation story of a hard-hitting gangster. Stories carry power—mind-shaping power. Thus, the dominant, as well as deficient, narrative in Japan needs to be de-constructed piece by piece, and re-authored. After all, people appear to be longing for this God that their current narrative keeps them from. Consider some of the signs. A survey by NHK (Japan National Broadcasting) in the mid-80’s showed that if Japanese were to choose a religion, over a third would choose Christianity (still yet, the Christian population remains around 1%). Walter Wangerin’s *The Book of God (Shosetsu Seisho)* enjoyed rampant sales a few years ago. The book was merely a rewriting of the Bible in novel form. And consider the countless newly weds that flirt with Christianity today? Presently, fifty two percent of marriages in Japan take vows in a Christian ceremony. Clearly, Japan appears to be showing its readiness for this God.

Thus the great task of the Church, which will require immense wisdom from Above, is to show that the Japanese Narrative fits perfectly into the God Narrative. This is accomplished by effectively, and affectively, iterating the story of the hearts longing. How the Japanese heart is really longing after God, and in the God Narrative, how the heart of God is longing after the Japanese. Such is the story that the cyber lonely, the materially compulsive, and the spiritually clueless, pine for underneath.

### The God Experience

The second aspect, which will define the health and influence of the Church, is that it must enter The God Experience as opposed to its present experience. This, as opposed to The God Narrative, is a very simple issue, and in most churches long overdue. The need for The God Experience refers to the tendency of the Church to idolize words without encountering the Word. To acquire much knowledge of the facts about God, while still staying high and dry from the waves of transformation. In the

words of Leonard Sweet, “Any community without the tang of ‘realness’ is too insipid for postmodern tastes- not to speak of Jesus himself.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet too often we are devoid of the very experience that we, the Church, and society seek. In the words of R.D. Laing, “It seems likely that for more people in our time neither experience the presence of God, nor the presence of his absence, but the absence of his presence.”<sup>12</sup> Personally, ministering at Ivy League schools in Tokyo during the late 80’s, awakened me to this hunger. Students cared little about knowledge of truth, but ardently sought after an experience of “life.” In this context, my approach to evangelism needed a radical adjustment. The heart experience of the marvelous Mystery now takes precedence over the principles and dogmas of the faith. As Nouwen emphasized, the future depends on our “movement from the moral to the mystical.”<sup>13</sup> Now, if the church is actually experiencing God, it becomes a place to encounter God, and in no matter what era or reactionary epoch it lives, souls will doubtless be irresistibly drawn to it.

A common tendency in the Church today is to bemoan the unresponsiveness of society to the message (or messenger, as the case may be). We wait for the culture to change, to open, and to come flooding in. But perhaps we are failing to see that change is all around; that this is the epoch of opportunity. The time for waiting has ended. We cannot exist as we have before.

## CONCLUSION

As simple as The God Experience is and as challenging as The Japan-God Narrative may seem, both exist outside the realm of rational dependence and toss the Church into a continual dependence on God’s working. Both the community of Japan and the Church of Japan are finding their true place and experience. Both paths lead away from the imported personality of Enlightenment vintage. It is in a way a reverse Enlightenment. But in this new order of unknown riptides, the Church not only offers total stability in a raging sea, but also exists in utter mystery on the Rock of refuge.

---

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Clammer as quoted in Arnason, Johann P. and Sugimoto, Yoshio, ed., *Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity* (London, Kegan Paul International, 1995), 27
- <sup>2</sup> Arnason, Johann P. and Sugimoto, Yoshio, ed., *Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity* (London, Kegan Paul International, 1995), 28
- <sup>3</sup> Miyazawa, Kenji, "Challenge of Third World Culture" published in *World Literature Today*, 62, No.3 Summer 1988, 359-369 as quoted by Kenzaburo Oe in Miyoshi, Masao and Harootunian, H.D., ed., *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1989) 213
- <sup>4</sup> Kurokawa, Kisho, *Selected and Current Works*, (Victoria, Australia, Images Publishing, 1995), 17
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 10
- <sup>6</sup> Kato, Shuichi as quoted by Asada Akira in "Infantile Capitalism and Japan's Postmodernism: A Fairy Tale" Snyder, Stephen and Philip, Gabriel, ed., *Oe and Beyond* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 27
- <sup>7</sup> Miyoshi, Masao, "Against the Native Grain: The Japanese Novel and the "Postmodern" West", in Miyoshi, Masao and Harootunian, H.D., ed., *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1989)
- <sup>8</sup> Asada, Akira "Infantile Capitalism and Japans Postmodernism: A Fairy Tale", in Snyder, *Oe and Beyond*, 221
- <sup>9</sup> Snyder, *Oe and Beyond*, 224
- <sup>10</sup> Mitsumori, Haruo, ed., *Operation Japan*, (Tokyo, JEMS, 1997), 16
- <sup>11</sup> Sweet, Leonard, *Soul Tsunami*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1999), 198
- <sup>12</sup> Laing, R.D., *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* as quoted in Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend*, (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980), 109
- <sup>13</sup> Nouwen, Henri, *In the Name of Jesus*, (New York, Crossroad, 2000), 32