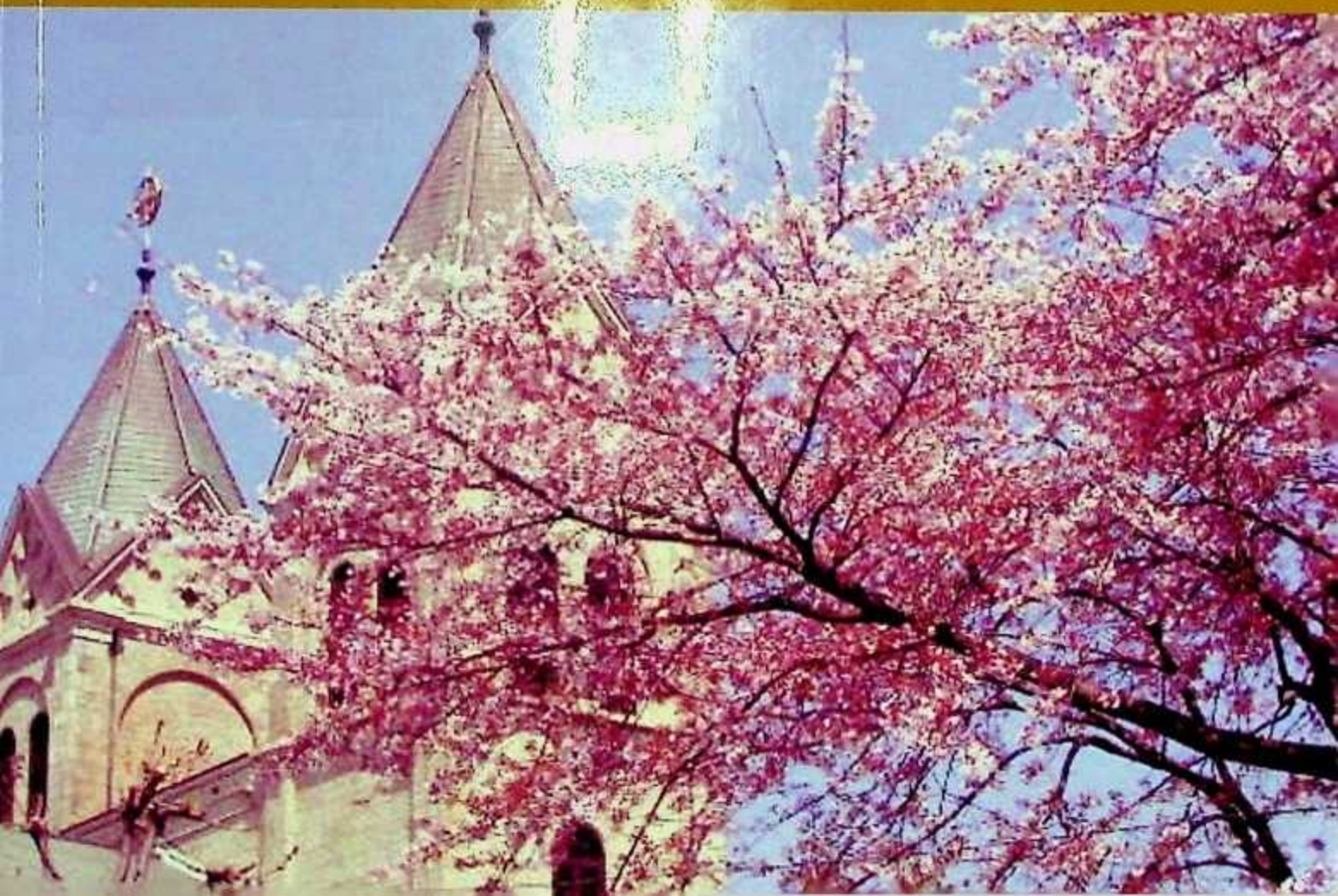


A FREE
CHURCH
IN A FREE
STATE

The Possibilities of Abraham Kuyper's Ecclesiology
for Japanese Evangelical Christians

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THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE
KERKEN IN NEDERLAND TE KAMPEN

A Free Church in A Free State

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Japanese Evangelical Christians

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Japanese Christians' Political Engagement and Ecclesiology

Contemporary Japanese Christians have difficulties in engaging with politics as Christians. They do have freedom of religion as guaranteed by the constitution, and in the course of time have succeeded in exercising significant influence on Japanese society, including the field of politics.¹ Some Japanese Christians have even managed to become prime minister.² However, they seem to keep their faith a private matter, and in their political engagement prioritize their identity as Japanese. One famous example is Ōhira Masayoshi (1910-1980), who served as prime minister from 1978 to 1980. He never brought his identity as Christian to the fore, and even ignored a letter from the National Council of Churches in Japan (NCCJ) urging an end to the practice of cabinet visits to Ise Shrine and Yasukuni Shrine. In response, Ōhira defended his worship at the shrines, emphasizing that it was his duty as a Japanese.³ In contrast, other Japanese Christians, particularly those who belong to evangelical circles, tend to avoid political engagement altogether.⁴

There are many interrelated factors hindering Japanese Christians in their political engagement. Aike Rots identifies one significant factor in the anti-Christian discourse that has long existed in Japan and developed over the course of several centuries.⁵ As a result, Christians in Japan find it difficult to integrate

¹ Mark R. Mullins, "Christianity in Contemporary Japanese Society," in *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions*, ed. Inken Prohl and John Nelson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 140-41.

² Their names, denominational affiliation, and terms of office are as follows: Hara Takashi, Catholic, 1918-1921; Takahashi Korekiyo, Protestant, 1921-1922; Yoshida Shigeru, Catholic, 1946-1947 and 1948-1954; Katayama Tetsu, Protestant, 1947-1948; Hatoyama Ichirō, Protestant, 1955-1956; Ōhira Masayoshi, Protestant, 1978-1980; Asō Tarō, Catholic, 2008-2009; Hatoyama Yukio, Protestant, 2009-2010. Yoshida had his family baptized, but kept his own baptism until his deathbed. Cf. Mohammad H. Oliai, "The Japanese and Christianity: A Complex Relation" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, 2013), 200-1; Kevin M. Doak, "Introduction: Catholicism, Modernity, and Japanese Culture," in *Xavier's Legacies: Catholicism in Modern Japanese Culture*, ed. Kevin M. Doak (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 4, 28, note 41.

³ M. William Steele, "Christianity and Politics in Japan," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. Mark R. Mullins (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 367. For a brief biography of Ōhira, see Albrecht Rothacher, *The Japanese Power Elite* (Chippenham: Rowe, 1993), 87-94. For a thorough biography, see Seizaburō Satō, Ken'ichi Kōyama, and Shunpei Kumon, *Postwar Politician: The Life of Former Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1990).

⁴ Michael J. Sherrill, "Christian Churches in The Postwar Period," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. Mark R. Mullins (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 169; Motoaki Shinohara, "The Church as God's Missionary Community: Towards an Evangelical Missional Ecclesiology with Implications for the Japanese Church" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2012), 250-51; Atsuyoshi Fujiwara, "Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context: A Believer's Church Perspective" (PhD diss., Durham University, 1999), 243. Fujiwara published his dissertation as a book with the same title with Wipf and Stock in 2012.

⁵ Aike P. Rots, "Ambiguous Identities: Negotiating Christianity and 'Japaneseness,'" in *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religion*, ed. Inken Prohl and John Nelson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 311.

their seemingly contradictory identities as Japanese and Christians. Even apart from the long persecutions during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) and the military oppression of Christians during the first half of the Shōwa period (1931-1945), William Steele finds another factor in the theological biases of individual redemption and piety. He likewise draws attention to a persistent, one-sided interpretation of Barthian theology, emphasizing that the church's mission is not to change the world but to be obedient to the Word of God.⁶ In the same vein, Shinohara Motoaki argues that the missionaries' unbalanced emphasis on individual salvation and the patriotic spirit of Japanese people had impeded Japanese Christians in developing a robust ecclesiological concept that could confront the state's attempt to subjugate the church during the pre-1945 period.⁷ In sum, the difficulties for Japanese Christians to engage in politics seems to relate to, if not originate from, their ambiguous ecclesiological concepts.

The ecclesiological problem is observable from other issues as well. Mark Mullins thus points to "a serious dropout rate or an aversion to organized religion" in Christian churches in Japan.⁸ Although a 2001 Gallup Poll reported that four percent of the population was Christian, church membership data of *Kirisutokyō Nenkan* for 2008 indicated that only 0.9 percent of the population belonged to a church. While the former used random sampling through the telephone survey method, the latter used questionnaires filled out by the Japanese churches. The discrepancy in the results indicates the possible existence of a group of people who self-identify as Christians but do not belong to any institutional church. Matsunaga asserts that Japanese Christians lack "the nurturing and training of individual Christians into the Body of Christ."⁹ Thomas Hastings observes that missionaries in Japan considered the mission schools more relevant to Japanese society and hoped that they could be used to evangelize many Japanese. As a result, some schools achieved a high level of public recognition, but missionaries were forced to concentrate more on education than evangelism. Moreover, between 1890 and 1945, the Japanese government exerted pressure on the mission schools to move them in a direction serving national policy, leading to a severe weakening in or even rejection of their evangelism commitment. Consequently, so Hastings

⁶ Steele, "Christianity and Politics," 360-61.

⁷ Shinohara, "The Church," 176-77.

⁸ Mullins, "Christianity in Contemporary," 138.

⁹ Kikuo Matsunaga, "Theological Education in Japan," in *Preparing for Witness in Context: 1998 Cook Theological Seminar*, ed. Jean S. Stoner (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1999), 299. Matsunaga also pointed to the results of a study in one church, possibly the Ushigome Haraikatamachi Church of UCCJ Shinjuku, Tokyo, showing that the average length of membership in this church is only 2.8 years. Cf. <http://www.revival.co.jp/rj/legwork-diary/2009/10/post-19.php> accessed 20 September 2017. See also Thomas J. Hastings, "Japan's Protestant Schools and Churches in Light of Early Mission Theory and History," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. Mark R. Mullins (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 102; Mullins, "Christianity in Contemporary," 138.

observes, there is virtually no synergic relationship between Christian schools and churches in Japanese Protestant circles.¹⁰

As mentioned briefly in the previous paragraph, the number of Christians in Japan is small. As of 31 December 2018, the Agency of Cultural Affairs (ACA) reported that the population of Christians in Japan was 1,921,484.¹¹ This figure is equal to 1.51 percent of 127,094,745, the total population reported by the 2015 National Census.¹² However, since the ACA did not implement strict reporting procedures from the registered religious bodies, the way of calculating and defining religious body members are different depending on each religious body. As a result, the total reported religious population, without the atheist population, is 181,329,376 persons, which is 54 million more than the total population. Trying to get more actual condition, the Japan Missions Research (JMR) of Tokyo Christian University combined and scrutinized the annual data from the Catholic Central Council, Christ Newspaper and Christian Newspaper. It reported that the number of Christian in 2018 was 1,044,733, which is equivalent to 0.83 percent of the total population.¹³ The details are as follows: Catholic: 440,832 (0.35% of total population); Eastern Orthodox: 9,816 (0.01%); and Protestant: 594,085 (0.47%). The 2018 JMR Investigation Report also mentioned that as of 2018, there were 8,003 Protestant churches with 274,360 attendants in Sunday service. Those figures mean that the average number of church members in one Protestant church is 74.23 and the average number of Sunday service attendance is 34.23.

Evaluating this small number of Christians in Japan, Furuya Yasuo has suggested that Christianity will be able to grow in Japan by improvements in the church's condition. In his analysis, the churches in Japan: (1) lack an element of joy in their worship; (2) have become temporary places of study like schools; and (3) are trapped in dogmatism and fail to reflect on society.¹⁴ Furuya predicts that his church group, the United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ) along with other

¹⁰ Hastings, "Japan's Protestant," 102–5, 112–13, 116–17.

¹¹ Bunka-chō [Agency for Cultural Affairs], ed., *Shūkyō Nenkan Reiwa Gan'nen-ban [Religious Year Book 2019]* (Tokyo: Bunka-chō, 2019), 35.

https://www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/hakusho_nenjihokokusho/shukyo_nenkan/pdf/r01nenkan.pdf. Accessed 5 August 2020.

¹² Statistics Bureau Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, *Final Report of the 2015 Population Census: Population and Households of Japan* (Tokyo, 2018), 2.

<https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/kokusei/2015/poj/pdf/2015sch01.pdf>. Accessed 5 August 2020.

¹³ Yamaguchi Yōichi and Shibata Hatsu, *JMR Chōsa Repo-to (2018 Nendo) [JMR Investigation Report 2018]* (Inzai: Tokyo Christian University Japan Missions Research, April 2019), 8, 15.

http://www.tci.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/JMR_report_2018.pdf. On the one hand, they removed Christian groups that are difficult to be considered as Christians; on the other hand, they added the number of Christians that have not been recorded based on the estimation of previous years' data.

¹⁴ Furuya Yasuo, "Naze Nihon ni Kirisutokyō wa Hiromaranainoka [Why does Christianity not prosper in Japan?]," *Nihon no Shingaku [Japan's Theology]* 53 (2014): 167–71.

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