

Theological and Historical Report
Key Themes in Japanese Theology

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One of the main themes that emerged from the research was the Japanese desire to keep their method of thinking, amidst the religious pluralism. There was openness to other religions but because Christianity pushed back on the pluralism, it was rejected. Some Japanese theologians that have impacted the way that Christianity is understood are Uchimura¹, Takenaka², Miyahira³, Odagaki⁴ and the concept of *wakon yosai* (Japanese spirit, Western learning)⁵. Uchimura established the non-church movement, *Mukyokai*, in 1901 which contrasted spiritual Japan from materialistic Christianity. The Mukyokai criticism is a direct response particularly to American Christianity.⁶ Uchimura, coming from the samurai class, was raised with feelings of disdain towards the priestly class. Though he was becoming more attuned to Christianity, he was opposed to becoming a Christian pastor or priest because of the hypocrisy that he felt it symbolized. Mukyokai spirituality is deeply connected to the Japanese attitude of *makoto*, meaning true, truthful, unselfish, pure, or honest. The essence of *makoto* is “pure heart” (*magokoro/makoto no kokoro*) and “honesty” (*shojiki*)⁷. Takenaka focused on indigenization of Christian theology. Miyahira attempted to understand the Trinity using concepts that the Japanese understood, applying them to the reality of the Triune God. Odagaki went into hermeneutical theology, explaining the nothingness yet divine duality of the non-theism of God.

Wakon yosai, Japanese spirit Western learning, is related to another key theme in Japanese Christian history of the role of education in the mission landscape of Japan. Because the country was technically closed to foreign missions until 1873 until the Meiji government

¹ Caldarola, *Christianity: The Japanese Way*, 73.

² Kim, *Christian Theology in Asia*,

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Hasting, *Competing Visions of Mission and Unity among Japanese Protestants and Missionaries*, 188.

⁶ Caldarola, *Christianity: The Japanese Way*, 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

allowed Christian missionary activity,⁸ missionaries had to find other ways to enter Japan. One of these was as teachers. Christianity was seen as a knowledge-based religion because of the education boom. There were more religious schools associated with Christianity than any other religion in Japan. This prepared the way for several of the Christian schools to follow. The rapid expansion of Christian schools and universities in the postwar period was bought at a severe price. The university crises from 1968 to 1971 significantly impacted all Japanese education as revision of the entire educational system ensued.⁹

Japan is thought to be a homogenous country, but those who identify as Christians are culturally diverse. Enrolment in the Christian schools are in high numbers of international students, or the children of foreign businesspeople who work or own businesses in Japan.¹⁰ A strong sense of community identity is found within the Christian community, like how the Japanese find a group identity in being Japanese. This can be a relational point for the gospel to interact with Japanese identity.

A prevailing difficulty for Christianity to reach the Japanese people has been the opposition towards any Westernization of their culture. Feeling that Westerners have always seen themselves not as working with Japanese people in knowing Jesus, but feeling as though they were solely being “converted” to become like the West, rather than seeing how Jesus meets them in their context. Changes need to continue to be made by those who are entering Japan on foreign mission to further bridge the cultural gap between western and Japanese theology, pursuing a Kingdom sociology for the purpose of instilling hope.¹¹

⁸ Phan, *Christianities in Asia*,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Priscilla Balona.

¹¹ Greenman, *Global Theology*.