Mission in Secularized Japan

Analyzing the Japanese words used to indicate the concept of "mission" may help to better facilitate understanding of the complexity of the topic. Our aim here is to offer a contribution on the topic of "mission" by presenting several innovative considerations.

A change in the paradigm, beyond terminology

Nowadays, the word "mission" is often used for any sort of pioneer project or new activity opening up a new historical context. However, it is worth considering whether this broad use is appropriate for the concept in the Christian sense: "dendo" (teaching the way), "fukyo" (spreading the truth) and "senkyo" (announcing the truth).

These three terms are used in different ways, especially in Christian Churches. "Dendo" is taken from the Buddhist context, "fukyo" is not as significant as it may seem at first glance. In both cases, they mean "spreading the doctrine." "Senkyo," on the other hand, is more significant in the Christian context. The "sen" element in "senkyo" is less familiar, but it means "declaring." In other words, when we talk about the mission of the Church, we have to think about the new ways of associating both "dendo" and "fukyo." From this perspective, we can say that "senkyo" is not only a "proclamation of the Word" but also a "dialogue" in the sense that both the clergy and the laity have to share in the missionary activity as well as in Church life.

On this last point, we need to mention two other terms that are closely connected to the development of the post–Council Church and the way of evangelization. "Senkyo" is used in new ways, especially in the context of ecumenical dialogue among the various Christian denominations and confessions. The search for the most appropriate word also entailed choosing the title for the main missionary magazine in Japan. When the "senkyo" term was chosen, it was also decided that the new missionary approach had to be rooted in the understanding of the Church as a "community" in the sense that both the clergy and the laity have to share in the missionary activity as well as in Church life.

In this respect, it would be necessary to consider pre–evangelization, as well as evangelization, as a single dynamic process. Pre–evangelization is the process of preparing the ground for the mission, while evangelization is the process of spreading the Gospel. In this sense, the "senkyo" term is more significant, especially in the context of the mission of the Church in Japan.

Proclamation of the Word and dialogue

"Proclamation of the Word" is clearly meant to be another expression to indicate mission. It aims at highlighting the importance of the Word in the mission of the Church. However, the "proclamation of the Word" is not only a "proclamation" but also a "dialogue" in the sense that both the clergy and the laity have to share in the missionary activity as well as in Church life.

A consistent mission approach must be rooted in three documents of the Second Vatican Council, which deal with this topic. The first document is "Dei Verbum," which deals with the "Word of God." The second document is "Gaudium et Spes," which deals with the "Church in the modern world." The third document is "Ad Gentes," which deals with the "mission of the Church." In a way, these three documents represent the cornerstone of the former ones.

The first impression one gets when reading the last of these three documents is that only in the end did the Council realize the importance of the mission of the Church. This is because mission (i.e. to attract followers and make converts for the Church) had to go on even to a greater extent.

Two great post–council pontifical documents urging missionary activity tried to nurture a new spirit. In his Apostolic Letter "Veni, Sancte Spiritus," Pope Paul VI stressed the importance of dialogue in evangelization or proclamation of the Word. In his Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesiam Tuam," Pope John Paul II stressed the importance of dialogue in the mission of the Church.

After the Council, both on the theoretical and practical levels, the key word to indicate new missionary activities was "senkyo." This term is not only significant in the context of the mission of the Church but also in the context of management and environmental protection, about which we may learn much from a number of Buddhist and Shinto colleagues.
Today, dialogue is carried out from a positive standpoint, as it helps us to consider how people live, what they think, and their cultural backgrounds to the culture of the country where they operate, as well as to the people to whom they try to proclaim the Gospel.

The pre-Council method, which aimed at obtaining visible and tangible results, that is, a large number of conversions, is no longer in practice today. Nevertheless, "Proclamation of the Word" does not conclude with "dialogue" but sees it as a crucial step.

While "mission" achieved great results in Japan during the sixteenth century, it is not possible to do the same today in a secularized country. The problem is how to go about doing so.

Secularization in Japan: anonymous Christians, baptized pagans

When dealing with the missionary approach in Japan today, we need to consider that the country is a modern secularized one, where people are free to choose their way of life without worrying about religious rules. Nevertheless, this concept cannot be applied as such to the global situation.

Max Weber and other sociologists used the term "secularization" in order to explain the social tendency to break free from religious constraints. This concept is crucial in understanding the modern context of Japan.

Theologian Harvey Cox and sociologist Peter Berger believe that Western society has lost sight of natural values, leading to the destruction of a civilization that had unilateral features and was not characterized by global and culturally complex events. This has led to a search for identity in the "community of the faithful".

When the Gospel is proclaimed to followers of other religions or to those who do not feel they need to embrace a specific religion, the situation is different. In Japan, people who were baptized when they were children may appear to a foreign Christian as being a frivolous attitude, but it is not eccentric for the modern Japanese culture.

Non-Christians, who are highly considered and who do not belong to any religion, are used to this attitude. In a way, in Japan, there is a distinction between public and private life, and religion and belief are considered to be two different things. This freedom also includes living one's daily life without any religious practice.

If we conceive mission in Japan in the old-fashioned way and hope to witness mass conversions as occurred in South Korea, we may be disappointed. This is because many people have not been practicing even though they were baptized. This is a Church living in a consumerist society that clashes with its values.

We would now like to quote a passage from an article by Keiichi Tadaki, former Prosecutor General: "I am an ordinary man who does not follow any religion. I can celebrate religious festivals into their own, while wiping out traditional features of other religious traditional celebrations."

"Our people have long been used to playing a double role: on the one hand, that of the devotee who supports the family's spiritual values, and on the other hand, that of the non-believer who does not consider them. It is almost impossible to evaluate the level of commitment that people have toward religions."

"Lately, as I am getting older, the number of my friends' funerals is on the rise. I decide to participate not according to my religious beliefs, but according to my human values. On the one hand, I tell myself: 'I will wait for my turn to die and then I will go to the upper world and I tell him in my heart: 'Wait for me, I will soon join you.' This is my concept of religion.""

These words do not express a trivial indifference nor an anti-religious or secular feeling. At first glance, they might seem to be a normal statement, but they show the high consideration for religion that a very intelligent person might hold. On the contrary, they show the need to re-think the concept of religion and its role in society.

The risk of religious intolerance?

Because Shinto polytheism refers to spiritual values, today's Japanese do not have any problem with religious tolerance. However, in the past, there were cases of religious intolerance, such as the Aum Shinrikyo cult, which murdered 13 people and injured 6,300, most of whom still suffer painful consequences today.

Religion may certainly foster human growth and development. But in extreme cases, belonging to a given religion may also lead to religious fanaticism and intolerance. This is why it is important to study this issue: the result was the document "Memory and Reconciliation. The Church and the Faults of the Past" (2000).

In particular, although in a vague and unconscious way, while gathering inspiration from polytheistic Japanese culture, many people think that the cultural polytheistic background of Japanese Shinto may ensure an irenic approach toward other religions.

Half a century ago, Islam was almost unknown in Japan. However, today there are 110,000 Muslims and 80 mosques in urban areas. The challenge is to find a way to share the Good News with people who have never heard of Christianity before, while being sensitive to their cultural and religious backgrounds.

Today, dialogue is carried out from a positive standpoint, as it helps us to consider how people live, what they think, and their cultural backgrounds. Dialogue is not just a means to convert people, but a way to understand and respect their way of life. This is the key to mission in Japan today.
1. Today, some regions of the world are experiencing a post–colonial age whose main feature is often a militant return of local religions, such as Islam in the Near East and Hinduism in India.


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