

Uchimura Kanzo: The Impact of America on His Christian Theology and Japanese Nationalism

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Traditional Christianity was spread throughout the world by missionaries representing the established ecclesiastical organizations. All faiths, from Roman Catholicism through post-reformation Protestant denominations, actively proselytized their particular brand of Christianity. The Pacific rim countries of Korea, China, and Japan experienced the influence of missionaries. However, after the Meiji Restoration, Japan also experienced a parallel and somewhat unique "Non-church" Christian movement which was led by the Japanese nationalist Uchimura Kanzo.

Uchimura is considered by many historians to be the most prominent Christian thinker of the Japanese Meiji era (1868-1912). He was converted to Christianity as a college student and came to the United States in 1884 to complete further college study. While in the United States, he was discouraged by the fact that America was not the "Christian country" he thought it would be. Increasingly he became disenchanted with what he viewed as the limitations and evils of America and its denominational Christianity.

Upon returning to Japan in 1888, he became one of the country's most prolific essayists and intellectuals, writing for both scholarly and popular audiences. He began a "non-church" movement in which he and his followers denied the validity of denominations. Not only was he an influential Christian, but his nationalistic views also exerted wide impact. Research has led me to believe that Uchimura's trip to the United States was the crucial element in his development as a Christian theologian and a Japanese nationalist. In order to look at his development as a Christian, we must examine his early life and Christian experiences. A question arises as to how a man raised in a non-Christian family could have become so devoutly

Christian. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how Uchimura was first introduced to Christianity, and what influence doctrine and denomination played in the formation of his early Christian views. Also intriguing is the circumstance and experience of Uchimura's study while in the United States. How did this experience influence his faith and nationalistic views?

Uchimura was born to parents Yoshiyuki and Yaso on 23 March 1861, the oldest of five children. His birth followed, by just seven years, the Meiji Restoration, which restored power to the emperor. The Restoration represented a dramatic change in Japanese society; for, during the preceding centuries, the country had been ruled by the samurai class and a shogun. In fact, the nation of Japan had not existed, rather the land had consisted of a series of separately ruled domains. Uchimura's grandfather had been a warrior samurai under the old system, an expert shot with both the bow and flintlock rifle.¹ Little information is available about Uchimura's mother except that it was said that she had a "mania for work" and that "her little home is her kingdom and she rules it, washes it, feeds it, as no queen has ever done."² We know that Uchimura's father, Yoshiyuki, was a samurai of low ranking status, but more refined and genteel than his grandfather. He was talented in both administration and poetry, embracing the Confucian belief system like many of his counterparts. Because of his father's beliefs, Confucianism became the first religion Uchimura experienced and embraced.³

Uchimura's father wanted his son to receive an education based on the Western model; since Japanese society was changing, he believed that one would need to be trained in the Western style. Uchimura was not alone in receiving a

western education. Many young men were sent overseas to study Western governmental, education, and banking systems. Trips such as the 1871 Iwakura Mission sent both men and women to the United States to study. Seeing this as the wave of the future, his father enrolled him in the Arima School in Tokyo at the age of twelve. Uchimura began his study of English at the age of thirteen when he was enrolled in the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages, and in 1876, at the age 16, he entered the Sapporo Agriculture College.

Sapporo Agriculture College was located on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, an area which the government was trying to develop agriculturally. The college was established in 1875 and the Japanese government brought in advisors from America to help the administration of the university. The primary advisor, William S. Clark, was president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, located in Amherst. Clark was a devout member of the Congregational Church, and when he agreed to go to Japan he took along several English language Bibles, intending to spread his Christian faith.⁴ He had a confrontation with the president of Sapporo College on his way to Japan about his right to teach Christianity to the students. A concession was made which allowed Clark to conduct a regular Bible study at the college. Although he only remained in Japan for eight months, Clark was profoundly influential with his students. This is evidenced by the fact that all of the first year students at the college converted to Christianity.

Uchimura entered Sapporo the year after Clark returned to America. The historian Hiroshi Miura points out that Uchimura enrolled in the school partially because of the stipend paid to him by the government, which he used to help his struggling family. Though a member of the samurai class, the family had suffered, like many others, when in 1876 the government abolished this class. Uchimura describes his first exposure to Christianity with both curiosity and humor. "Sunday after Sunday I resorted to this place, not knowing the awful consequence that was to follow such a practice. An old English lady from whom I learned my first lessons in English took a great delight in my church-going,

unaware of the fact that sight-seeing, and not truth-seeking, was the only view I had in my 'Sunday excursion to the settlement' as I called it."⁵

Clark's original students made it their mission to convert all incoming students in Uchimura's class to Christianity.⁶ Uchimura, adhering to his father's Confucian upbringing, lead the resistance against the conversion. In his autobiography, Uchimura describes his "conversion after coercion" as approaching harassment from the elder students. He stated, "So, you see, my first step toward Christianity was a forced one, against my will, and I must confess, somewhat against my conscience too."⁷ Nevertheless, after Uchimura's 1877 conversion to Christianity, he began a conscientious study and immersion into his new found faith. He was one of seven classmates who began their own Christian meetings and dormitory study. The group came to be known as the "Brotherhood of Seven." His new Christian fervor grew during the next five years.

In July 1881, Uchimura graduated first in his class from the Sapporo College. The seven students decided to open their own church in Sapporo and first approached the Reverend Denning, an Anglican missionary, for the necessary financial support. Their request was denied because there was already an Anglican church in the community. Undeterred, the students next approached the Rev. J. C. Davison, a Methodist Episcopal missionary. He did offer to support the effort to build a new church, but the students and Davison soon came to a difference of opinion over the students' determination to keep their church independent of Methodism. Because of this difference, the students accepted the money, not as a gift, but as a loan, vowing to pay it back as quickly as possible. In his diary, Uchimura wrote, "We felt for the first time in our Christian experience the evils of denominationalism."⁸

During the summer of 1881, a few other significant events occurred. For one, Uchimura studied the structure of some Christian churches to insure that the recently founded Sapporo church would have a proper foundation. Second, with the graduation stipend he received from the government, he bought a series of books about Christianity. The books, written in

Chinese by a German missionary, acted as the foundation of his father's Christian conversion.⁹ Uchimura returned to Tokyo for a short time to visit his family and to engage in missionary work. In the fall, however, he returned to Sapporo along with the other members of his graduating class to assume their government jobs; but after less than two years of government service, Uchimura resigned from his position and moved back to Tokyo. While attending a conference on Japanese Christianity, as a representative of his home church in Sapporo, he met a young girl, Takeko Asada. By his own choice he asked her to marry, a custom uncommon in Japan at that time.¹⁰ The marriage, against his parents' will, proved to be a disaster and ended within six months of its inception. His Sapporo church said the divorce was "against the teaching of the Bible, and therefore that Uchimura was a 'heretic.'" ¹¹ Japanese historian, Massaike, believes these accusations made Uchimura distance himself from the church and indirectly contributed to his stand on *mukyokai-shugi* (Non-churchism) in later years.¹²

Because of the isolation from his church and his inability to find an acceptable profession, Uchimura decided to study in America and London. He sold all of his belongings in order to finance his trip and set sail for the "Christian Country." Uchimura envisioned America as a place "where Christianity having had undisputed power and influence for hundreds of years, must, I imagined, be found Peace and Joy in a measure inconceivable to us of heathen extraction."¹³ He thought of America as a "holy land." "My idea of the Christian America was lofty, religious, Puritanic. I dreamed of its templed hills, and rocks that rang with hymns and praise. Hebraisms, I thought, to be the prevailing speech of the American commonality, and cherub and cherubim, hallelujahs and amens, the common language of its streets."¹⁴

Uchimura arrived in San Francisco in November 1884 and immediately began to experience disappointment. He heard cursing and profanity in everyday conversations, a practice he had been taught was a sin. Someone on the ship stole many of his possessions, again a practice Uchimura believed disregarded God's laws. He had not expected

American Christians to behave in this manner. On the trip from San Francisco, Uchimura spent a day in Chicago with a Methodist minister talking about his plans for spreading the word of God in Japan. When it came time to leave for the train station, the minister sent one of his deacons¹⁵ to help with the baggage. Uchimura recalls in his biography the time at the train station.

With courtesy and many thanks we extended our hands to take our goods to ourselves, to which our Methodist deacon objected; but stretching forth his dusky hand toward us, said "Jist gib me somding." He had our valises in his custody, and only "somding" could recover them from his hands. Then engine-bell was ringing; it was not time to argue with him. Each of us dropped a 50-cent piece into his hand, our things were transferred to us, to a coach we hastened, and as the train began to move, we looked to each other in amazement, and said, "Even charity is bartered here." Since then we never have trusted in the kind words of black deacons.¹⁶

Uchimura observed racism against blacks and Orientals. He and his fellow Japanese students were often stereotyped as Chinese. These incidents led to some of his nationalistic views on Japan. He felt that America was a hypocritical society and came to believe that America espoused Christian virtues and ethics while there was a distinct evilness rooted in the society. He writes, "One thing I shall never do in future: I shall never defend Christianity upon its being the religion of Europe and America."¹⁷ He writes in his biography "O heaven, I am undone! I was deceived! I gave up what was really Peace for that which is no Peace!"¹⁸

The longer Uchimura was in America, the more his Japanese national views were rekindled. Only from the perspective of life abroad did he come to deeply appreciate his homeland. Uchimura quotes the Chinese sage, "he who stays in a mountain knows not the mountain." He goes on to say, "My views of my native land were extremely one-sided while I stayed in it."¹⁹ His view of Japan became more lofty and nationalistic because of his time in the United States. In 1884, he worked in a hospital for mentally deficient children in Elwyn, Pennsylvania.²⁰ He disliked the work and was

subjected to some prejudice, being called a "Jap."²¹ He was however befriended by Quakers and experienced their religious meetings and practices. Elements of the Quaker religion were later reflected in his Non-church movement.²²

With a few letters of introduction, Uchimura began his study as a junior at Massachusetts Amherst College in September of 1885. He took classes in Church history, Greek, Hebrew, and Western history. He had difficulty understanding and disliked the study of philosophy. Most importantly, while at Amherst, Uchimura became friends with the president of the university, Julius Seelye, who profoundly influenced him by personalizing his belief in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. According to Jennings, Seelye called Uchimura into his office one day to talk. During the discussion, he posed this question to Uchimura "Why did he not stop looking within himself and look up to Christ who was crucified in redemption for his sins?" Uchimura said that this question "transformed him from an ineffectual and doubting student into a vibrant believer."²³ Uchimura graduated from Amherst in 1887.

After graduation he enrolled in the Hartford Theological Seminary. There are conflicting theories about his reason for entering the seminary. One is that he wanted to continue his study of church history, and another is that Uchimura actually wanted to become a minister.²⁴ Nonetheless, after four months Uchimura withdrew from the Seminary for health reasons. "Although he had chosen to become a clergyman as his divine vocation, he was therefore unable to complete the course of training required of clergyman in the institutionalized church. Ohyama suggests that this is the fundamental reason for Uchimura's Mukyokai-shugi (Non-churchism)."²⁵

Upon Uchimura's return from America in 1888, several incidents revealed his new devotion to an independent Christianity. By the time of his return to Japan, the country had changed. The country had become more nationalistic and the constitution was about to be ratified. These changes made what happened to Uchimura in the coming years important to Japan as well as himself. He took a position as a

principal of a school north of Tokyo. However, he was there for only a short time because he became enmeshed in a controversy with Christian missionaries working at the school. The missionaries became upset when Uchimura brought in a Buddhist clergy member to help teach Japanese religious history. He resigned because he was upset that the missionaries did not want the true history of Japan to be taught. Shortly afterwards, Uchimura married a childhood friend and obtained a teaching position at the prestigious Daiichi Koto Chugakko. Again a controversy arose, this time over the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education. The Rescript included an oath to the emperor and Japan, which students said before each school day. In 1891, the school had its first reading of the document and Uchimura refused to bow to what he thought was a "heathen idol." The case became a national sensation and Uchimura lost his teaching position because of the behavior. Almost immediately he became very sick, and almost died. He recovered, and began to settle into writing the work which would occupy the rest of his life. Gradually, Uchimura became an influential essayist and journalist. Not only did he write about his beliefs and non-church theology, but also about a variety of topics of national interest. In 1897, he became an editor at the largest newspaper in Japan, *Yorozu Choho*. He held this position for several years until late 1903 when the journal came out in favor of going to war with Russia. Uchimura became disenchanted because he was against the killing of human beings which he considered a great sin. After leaving the newspaper, Uchimura started his own journal entitled, *Biblical Studies*, which was produced for thirty years.

Uchimura was the founder of the largest and most influential Non-church movement in Japan.²⁶ He was not trying to destroy conventional churches or say they were wrong in their beliefs. He simply felt that conventional churches did not always meet everyone's needs. The goal for his Non-church movement was to meet the needs of people that the traditional churches missed. Miura says of Uchimura's belief, "One man may be saved by joining the church, but another may be saved by leaving it. The important thing is to save people."²⁷ He

said that all of Earth's beauty was the church for the Non-church movement. Christians did not need traditional Western-based denominational support or church doctrine because nothing could match the beauty and order of the Japanese society. Ministers in the Non-church movement are not ordained and they do not receive a salary. It remains customary today, as it was with Uchimura himself, that they hold a separate profession and give their spare time to the ministry of Christ. Since there are neither national organizations nor buildings for people to gather in, meetings and worship services are held in private homes or rented buildings.²⁸

Uchimura Kanzo left Japan in 1884 to find his "golden nation of Christendom" in America but ended up with a faith which alienated him from both Western missionaries and Japanese nationalists. He found true faith thanks to his teacher and mentors, but he also found in America a society where there was bigotry,

hypocrisy, sectarian Christianity, and sterile theology. In some ways Uchimura, while in America, returned to the Japanese samurai traditions of his father and grandfather and to a respect for value of Japanese culture. He never wavered from his Christian commitment professed in the Covenant of Believers in Jesus, signed in 1876.²⁹ He accepted Western-style Christianity but rejected the Western culture upon which sectarian Christianity rests. He wrote "I love two J's and no third; one is Jesus, and the other is Japan. I do not know which I love more, Jesus or Japan. I am hated by my countrymen for Jesus' sake . . . and I am disliked by foreign missionaries for Japan's sake as national and narrow."³⁰ His dual loves lead him to "fuse Christian evangelization with patriotic loyalty." This, according to historian Raymond Jennings, "resulted in isolation from both the main Christian group in Japan and politically powerful Japanese."³¹

End Notes

¹Uchimura Kanzo, *How I Became a Christian* (Tokyo: The Eihosha Ltd, 1977), 12.

² Ibid., 14.

³In 1881 Yoshiyuki Kanzo was converted to Christianity, four full years after his son's conversion.

⁴Sources differ on the actual number of Bibles. Some place it at 30 and others at 50.

⁵Ibid., 21.

⁶There were 29 people in his class.

⁷*The Complete Works of Kanzo Uchimura*, ed. Taijiro Yamamoto Yoichi Muto, vol.1, *How I Became A Christian Out of My Diary* (Tokyo: Kyobunkwan, 1971), 26.

⁸Ibid., 57.

⁹Five volume set, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Mark*, by Faber

¹⁰Raymond P. Jennings, *Jesus Japan and Kanzo Uchimura: A Study of the View of the Church of Kanzo Uchimura and its Significance for Japanese Christianity* (Tokyo: Christian Literature Society, 1958), 19.

¹¹Hiroshi Miura, *The Life and Thought of Kanzo Uchimura* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 29.

¹² Ibid.

¹³Taijiro Yamamoto Yoichi Muto, 101.

¹⁴Ibid., 105.

¹⁵Whether the man was in fact a deacon has been questioned by other authors. Jennings reports him to be a waiter posing to be a deacon.

¹⁶Ibid., 109.

¹⁷Ibid., 119.

¹⁸Ibid., 118.

¹⁹Ibid., 121.

²⁰The spelling of the city was recorded as both Elwyn and Elwin.

²¹Norimichi Ebizawa, ed., *Japanese Witnesses For Christ* (New York: Association Press, 1957), 56.

²²Examples of the influence freedom of individuals to come to their beliefs leaderless meetings, and meetings in home.

²³Raymond P. Jennings, *Jesus Japan and Kanzo Uchimura: A Study of the View of the Church of Kanzo Uchimura and its Significance for Japanese Christianity* (Tokyo: Christian Literature Society, 1958), 26-27.

²⁴Miura, 33-34.

²⁵Ibid., 34.

²⁶His was not the only Non-church movement. Jennings identifies the Omi Brotherhood and Y.M.C.A./Y.W.C.A. as similar groups.

²⁷Miura, 108.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

²⁹Uchimura Kanzo, *How I Became a Christian* (Tokyo: The Eihosha Ltd, 1977), 24.

³⁰Raymond P. Jennings, *Jesus Japan and Kanzo Uchimura: A Study of the View of the Church of Kanzo Uchimura and its Significance for Japanese Christianity* (Tokyo: Christian Literature Society, 1958), 1.

³¹*Ibid.*, 2.

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