

Intercultural Encounters as Religious Education:

A Phenomenological Study on a Group of Japanese Students
at a Christian University in California

by

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Introduction

Having been involved in college education at a Christian university in California for some time, I have witnessed a great number of Japanese students become interested in religion, particularly in Christianity. 30 to 40 Japanese students, who are originally from Japan, are enrolled every year at this university and usually about a half of them are self-professed 'non-religious' students at the beginning of their stay in the United States. Up to a half of those 'non-religious' Japanese students, year after year, become participants (some are more active than others) in local Christian churches in the area. This is an astounding percentage, considering that most young Japanese are said to have very little interest in organized religions, and that the number of Christians in Japan is less than one percent of the entire population in most estimates. As a religious educator and a researcher, I am fascinated by this group of students at this university and have decided to conduct a study to learn from them.

Research Method

The "grounded theory," which was used in this study, takes the approach of phenomenology one step further and focuses on the emerging theories from systematic comparative analysis, which is grounded in fieldwork.¹ Perhaps grounded theory is most accurately described as a research method in which the theory is developed from the data, rather than the other way around.² Therefore, the first and foremost purpose of this research is to attempt to build a meaningful and reliable theory based on the fieldwork among young Japanese university students focusing on their religious experiences.

A group of young Japanese college students, ages from 19 to 24, from a Christian university in Southern California, who have lived in the United States for at least half a year, were chosen as the research subject. At the time of this study, 34 Japanese students were enrolled at this university. In order to observe some changes that took place (or taking place) in their religious views and experiences related to religion, 17 students, who considered them-selves non-religious at the time of departure from Japan initially, became the research targets. And out of 17 students, 10 (6 female and 4 male) were available and willing to be extensively interviewed.

A variety of qualitative data focused on their American experiences were gathered by using standardized open-ended interviews, comparison of people's behavior both in public and in private, and observation of naturally-occurring social interactions in their college life. Standardized open-ended interviews were conducted on 10 willing students who agreed to be interviewed. Interview participants were required to sit through approximately one hour of an in-depth interview. 10 pre-determined open-ended questions, ranging from a simple chronological question to more in-depth personal questions, were asked.

Here are the 10 open-ended questions. 1) When did you come to the United States? 2) Why did you come? 3) Were you a religious person in Japan? 4) Did you participate in religious activities in Japan? 5) What did you think about religion when you were in Japan? 6) Did your opinion about America life and/or religion change after you came to the United States? 7) If so, what do you think caused the change? 8) Were there any significant encounters with religion, which you consider noteworthy? 9) How did your view on religion or your world-view change? 10) What did you think about this interview?

¹ Michael Quinn Patton. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications. 2002. p.487.

² Ansel Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications. 1998. p.13.

Imagery of Religion and Christianity among Young Japanese

It has been well documented by many researchers of Japanese religiosity that in general, the younger generation of Japanese, especially the college age young adults, have very negative views of organized religions. Martin Repp of NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions of Kyoto, Japan wrote that the image of established religions held by young Japanese, is that of “corrupt, degenerate organizations.”³ Most scholars also agree that the “Aum-Shinrikyo” incident, a cult group, using poison gas, killed many innocent commuters on Tokyo subway system, and the sensationalism that created, played a huge and irreversible role in engraving much fear of organized religion into the minds of Japanese people.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that young Japanese are opposed to western religion. In fact some imagery that are associated with Christianity such as church wedding ceremony with white wedding dress, Valentine’s Day gift giving, and Christmas celebrations are extremely popular among them and are often imitated. When it comes to Christianity as an organized religion, according to Antonia Levi, who is a researcher of Japanese history and pop-culture, many young people regard it “as something exotic, inscrutable, superstitious.”⁴ Levi goes on to state that the “[negative] image of Christian religion [to young Japanese] may seem odd to many Americans, but it’s really no different from the image American film-makers try to create when they use sets involving multi-armed Hindu statues to indicate something dark and unknown.”⁵

Both Repp’s and Levi’s views on young Japanese were found to be very accurate during the interview sessions. All 10 students expressed that while in Japan, they possessed very negative views of organized religion.

American Culture and Christianity

It was very fascinating to see how so many participants of this study possessed similar feelings and opinions about religion and also about American culture before coming to the United States. All 10 students stated that the one of the strongest reason for coming to the United States to study was that they really loved the image of America portrayed by various Japanese and American media including movies, television programs and popular magazines. Those images of American life had one commonality: They were, images of ultimate freedom.

However, when they were asked about their current feelings about their life in America, many of them stated that they were disappointed. The three most mentioned reasons for their disappointments were 1) restriction on traveling by not owning automobiles, 2) restriction on communication by their language limitations, and 3) restriction on movements by their own crime preventive measures.

On the other hand, when the students were asked about their current view on religion, most of them communicated generally positive feelings. All 10 students pointed out that their experience with religion, and with Christianity in particular, have been relatively pleasant. When asked, many of the students mentioned about their positive experience with their Christian host families. Others mentioned attending the Japanese student fellowship meetings sponsored by a group of

³ Martin Repp, *Youth and New-New Religions: Challenges for the Churches in Present-Day Japan*. The Christian Review: 1997; 63. p.15.

⁴ Antonia Levi, Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1996. p.25.

⁵ Ibid., p.63.

many common conversion experiences.⁷ During the initial phase of individual's conversion experience, what he calls a 'crisis,' which serves as a catalyst for change, is usually present. Crisis, according to Rambo are, "disordering and disputing experiences that call into question a person's or group's taken for granted world."⁸ Rambo goes on and states, "On a personal level, a crisis may be triggered by people or events. Much of the human science literature has emphasized social disintegration, political oppression, or something very dynamic as instigating crisis."⁹ And he claims that the "Crisis of transition may give rise to greater openness to accept religious options which were rejected previously."¹⁰

A question is this. In the case of Japanese students in this study and in their transforming religious worldview, did some type of crisis occur to serve as a catalyst? Based on my observation of the students, there were numerous crisis events occurring simultaneously in their life, that could very well serve as catalysts for many changes. Rambo also makes a very interesting observation about conversion experiences in American university settings. He stated, "On college campuses, religious groups often find their most successful outreach periods to be early fall, when new and returning students experiencing increased social dislocation and, therefore, seek ways to meet their need to belong and for social intimacy."¹¹ If even the American students find increased social dislocation in their university life, imagine what the Japanese students, or for that matter, any other international students, must go through in trying to adapt to their new American college environment.

Conversion Theory of Lofland and the Experience of Japanese Students

Another theory of religious conversion, which may be helpful to this study, is that of John Lofland's "conversion motifs."¹² He argued, that different perceptions and descriptions of conversion exist because qualities that make conversion experiences are substantially different.¹³ Conversion motifs, which they identified include, intellectual, mystical, coercive, and affectional. Intellectual conversions, according to Lofland, occur without much human interaction. Mystical conversion is more of a sudden and traumatic conversion. Coercive conversion involves brainwashing and other types of coercive persuasion. Affectional conversion motif of Lofland is, in my opinion, very similar to what the students of this study experienced. This motif stresses interpersonal bonds as very important factor in the conversion process.¹⁴ Personal experience such as that of love, affection, nurture, and acceptance are central to this motif.

As it was mentioned before, all 10 participants of this study named meeting Christians as one of the most significant encounters in causing changes in their perception of religion. Interestingly I also observed no significant gender differences in the answers. It may be reasonable to assume

⁷ Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, *Converting: Stages of Religious Change*, in *Religious Conversion*. eds. Christopher Lamb & M. Darrol Bryant. London: Cassell, 1999. p.24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 20 (1981): 373-85.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862-75.

that the participating students, and perhaps many Japanese students in general, tend to go through the affectional motif of religious conversion and that they generally respond well to this approach.

Cross-Cultural Encounter as Religious Education

We have seen so far that changes in one's religious worldview or religious transformations, that occurred in the lives of many Japanese students of this study, have actually took place within the boundaries of several existing religious conversion theories. Let us now examine the particular value of their experience from the standpoint of religious education.

James Fowler stated that a person's young adulthood is one of the most crucial periods in stages of his or her religious faith development.¹⁵ "Coming out of a very peer oriented synthetic-conventional stage, young adults must make critical choices in reaction to their identity and faith. ... Concurrent with this critical, systematic selection of one's beliefs, values, and commitments, there must also be a fading dependence upon the borrowed beliefs and values of significant others."¹⁶ Many religious education theorists with developmental views also believe that going through life's crisis experiences are necessary steps in attaining more mature religious faith especially for the college age youth.¹⁷ Even for some, transition from a conformist view of religion to more mature, self-owned faith can only be attained through "a rocky road, strewn with spiritual doubts and questions."¹⁸

Many Japanese youth chose not to (or not have the opportunity to) risk this rocky road and continue to possess ambiguously negative feelings toward religion, and in general, into their adulthood. The students in this study, on the other hand, faced many crisis events by experiencing cross-cultural and religious encounters and were forced to go through difficult self-reflections. Some may have attained the higher stage of faith according to the theory of Fowler. One student remarked, "When I was in Japan, I had very negative views of religion because I was told that religions are for the weak and that religion will take an advantage of you. Coming to the United States and meeting with very nice and thoughtful people who are very religious, made me think that may be, what I thought about religion is irrational. Even though I do not consider myself as a Christian, I think I need to take home with me to Japan, many positive aspects of this religion which I think very highly of now."¹⁹ Another student also stated, "My grand parents are Buddhists in Japan. I hated them when they were practicing what I thought as meaningless rituals. Now that I consider myself a Christian, although I probably do not agree with what they believe, I have developed a sense of respect for their spirituality and for what they believe to be very important. When I go home, I will share my faith with them and I am very exited about that."²⁰

It is very important to note that I am in no way making an assertion that all 10 Japanese students that I interviewed have attained, what Fowler calls, the higher level of religious consciousness through their cultural experience. Some students were very articulate and very clear about his or her newly formed religiosity. Others attained a favorable opinion on Christian religion than before. What I would like to underscore here is that, although the levels of religious

¹⁵ James Fowler, Stages of Faith. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

¹⁶ Steve Fortosis, "The Religious Education of College Students." In Handbook of Young Adult Religious Education. ed, by Harley Atkinson. Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1995, p.231.(This is a description of Fowler's thoughts depicted by Steve Fortosis.)

¹⁷ Ibid., p.241.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ male student: age 23 (comment translated from Japanese)

²⁰ female student: age 19 (comment translated from Japanese)

transformation vary for a great deal, all 10 student have, in one way or another, stepped out (or forced to step out) from their popular conformist and undifferentiated view of religion into something different something new. That, in my opinion, as a Japanese religious educator, is extremely significant and important.

On a different note, I would like to make a few remarks regarding the answers to the last question from the list of 10 open-ended questions, which asked the students to share what they thought about the interview process that they just went through. Their answers were very favorable. Although Japanese students tend to be very polite, and are very unlikely to make negative comments to the last question, all 10 students gave positive comments such as fun and interesting, and to me, they sounded sincere. I received from 4 students a similar comment and that truly were fascinating. It was that the interview itself was helpful for them in sorting out their experience and their feelings toward religion. One student even thanked me and said, "Because of this interview, now I know that I have a different view about religion and Christian faith and that surprised me. I think what I have experienced over here really changed me."²¹ Throughout the interview process, both the interviewee and myself as the interviewer have tried to engage in asking intimate and introspective questions to reach deep into his or her life experience. We also tried hard to make sense out of what were found.

Merry Elizabeth Moore, in her book *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method*, identified six different pedagogical frameworks. One of which is called the phenomenological method. She writes, "Phenomenology is a method of reflecting on experience and letting conclusions emerge from those reflections."²² It is an inter-subjective educational method with two dimensions. According to Moore, "The first dimension is reaching into oneself and others to observe life experiences. -- The second dimension is drawing forth the meaning in the life experiences. This is the interpretative task, and it is usually done in collaboration or dialogue."²³ Just as this research utilizes the method of phenomenology, each interview sessions, because of the nature of this study, also became small phenomenological educational endeavors. From the reactions that I received, most students found this exercise enjoyable and also very meaningful and helpful.

Again, the spectrum of religious conversion or transformation varied with each participating Japanese student. However, I can, without hesitation, affirm that 'religious education' did take place, with very positive results, during his or her unique inter-cultural and religious experience in the United States. Now, I would like to make the following assertions based on this research.

- 1) Inter-cultural experience of Japanese students creates crisis situations, which may serve as catalyst to question their existing and uncritical belief about religion.
- 2) Japanese students, in general, respond well to approaches, which utilizes personal affection, love, and nurturing to encourage religious transformation.
- 3) The presence of caring and loving individuals is crucial in aiding the religious transformation of Japanese students.
- 4) Phenomenological educational method generally works well with Japanese students during the process of religious transformation.

²¹ female student: age 23 (comment translated from Japanese)

²² Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity International, 1998. pp. 83-84.

²³ Ibid.

Future Implications

International students on American college campuses are often neglected. Perhaps not so much because of racism, but because their cultural backgrounds are very different from the majority of American students and communicating with them can be very challenging. From a religious educator's point of view, they are, unfortunately, not being recognized for already going through some very tough cultural transitioning stages, which would in fact make them prime objects for some very meaningful pedagogical exercises, especially for many Christian universities and colleges. Of course, each group of international students is very different from the other and what worked on this particular group of students on this study may well be of no significant value to some other groups. Therefore, religious educators with zeal for research must step up and engage them with passion and love, recognizing that, on many US college campuses, there are countless number of international students representing different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. What we may be able to learn form them is really limitless. And by engaging in meaningful interactions and dialogues, perhaps using the method of phenomenology, religious educators may be able to have a small part in creating the atmosphere of peaceful and productive learning environment, which, as we all know, is much needed in our campuses today.