

*The Universalist sent their first missionaries to Japan in the late 1880s. John M. Shidara, who served the Komagane Universalist Church in Komagane-Fukuoka, was ordained in 1934 in Tokyo by the Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America.*

Statement Prepared By Rev. John M. Shidara  
for use during his visit in U.S.A 1967-'68

I was not originally a Christian.

I was born and brought up in a Buddhist family.

My grandfather, who took care of me, was a *samurai* and he influenced me by Confucianism and *Bushido* based on the Zen sect.

When I was 22 years old, I lost my mother by tragedy; and I found it hard to live any more in the midst of misunderstandings and hatred. Even my father could not understand me then. All of the teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, Bushido and moralism gave me not comfort. And I became ill and depressed. I had almost decided to kill myself. But at that time my Christian friend took me to a Universalist missionary, who showed me the love of God revealed by Jesus Christ, I had never heard this before. This teaching of love is unique, found only in Christianity. When St. Paul was converted to Christianity from Judaism, the reason was that he discovered this kind of love in Stephen.

In Japan about 350 years ago, the *Tokugama Shogunate* government ordered people to decide the family's religion and forbade them to change or elect their favorite religion thereafter. And its influence remained until before World War II. So, to confess to be a Christian was a rather difficult thing, requiring spiritual courage. Even now, there is only one Christian in 135 persons in the total population.

Four hundred and thirty years ago, Francis Xavier came to Japan to teach Christianity; and within a number of years about 200,000 people were converted to Christianity. In 1613, it is said that there were as many as 300,000 converts, with perhaps 250 organized churches. When the government learned this, they were very surprised at this fact and strictly forbade people to believe in Christianity. They persecuted Christians and put them to death. With this suppression, Christianity disappeared from the surface of Japan.

Hundred years ago, many great Protestant leaders came to Japan from the United States, England and other countries; and they contributed so much in many ways. We can not forget their great personal influence.

It was inevitable that, when Japan was forced to emerge from her long isolation, and enter the fellowship of nations, that the Christian gospel should again be introduced. The year after the first treaty between Japan and the United States was ratified, the first missionaries came. This was in 1859, and the representatives of both Protestant and Catholic societies reached Japan before the end of that year. At first, any Japanese who associated with those foreigners was under suspicion. But, they were splendid persons and influenced many Japanese.

The Meiji Government, in 1890, drew up a constitution by which it declared freedom of faith, but most of the Japanese did not have much interest in Christianity. For long years their religious spirits had been dulled by the severe religious policy of the *Tokugawa Shogunate* government.

I suppose you can not understand the complex condition of the religions in Japan today. According to the report of the Education Ministry in 1965:

Believers in Shintoism were....	79 million 8 hundred and 89 thousand;
Believers in Buddhism were....	73 million 7 hundred and 57 thousand;
Believers in Christianity were....	7 hundred and 52 thousand; and
Believers in other religions were...	5 million 3 hundred and 43 thousand.

THE TOTAL FIGURE is 159 million 5 hundred and 42 thousand.

BUT – the WHOLE POPULATION of Japan in 1965 was  
98 million 2 hundred and 52 thousand.

But, how can there be 61 million 2 hundred and 59 thousand registered believers  
MORE THAN the figure for the total population??

There is an explanation.

We often say: when a baby is born, “They have a new-born baby; a first visit is to its titular *Shinto* Shrine; when they marry, they choose a hall for the ceremony in a Christian church; and when they die, the funeral service will be held by a Buddhist priest. Can you understand this Japanese religious SYNCRONISM? Many Japanese say that they are Shintoists because their fathers were Shintoists; they are Buddhist because their ancestors were Buddhists. If you ask them, “What is Shintoism? What is Buddhism? What do you believe?” then you discover they can not answer; they have nothing to believe or trust. They are only keeping the ritual and the formal tradition. So, one scholar said, “In Japan most of the people have not faith.” Recently, in Japan most of the children have been brought up without religious feeling in their homes, in their schools, and in their society. Buddhist Temples and Shinto Shrines do not teach anything. Children have no opportunity to learn about religion; Buddhist Temples and Shintoists Shrines both have some festivals as annual events. Children are enjoying them as their recreation. Thus, children do not know religion and young people are losing their interest in religion.

When I was 22 years old I thought I was a Buddhist because my ancestors' graves were in the yard of a Buddhist temple and sometimes I went to my grand-parents' graves to have the memorial service there; and every day I was clapping my hands and bowing before the tablets of our ancestors. But when I faced severe distress, nothing could comfort me. My religious spirit was dormant. Nobody surrounding me showed me a true religion; they did not know the true religious, either. And, so, the love of God revealed by Jesus awakened my religious spirit from its deep sleep.

It is a very sad thing that the Japanese have been losing their good things which they inherited. Buddhism must be great; Shintoism must be splendid. And, we can find the proof of it in books and fine works of art when we study and trace our past. But now, in practice, we can not find greatness in present-day Buddhism nor in Shintoism. The Japanese do not know that the original precious meaning and spirit of those religions have been lost.

It is said that there are two great universal religions in the world, they are Buddhism and Christianity. But in Japan Buddhism was Japanized, or nationalized too much and lost its universal meaning.

During the past 100 years Christians erected 1,500 churches and many prominent universities, good hospitals; and Christian kindergartens have multiplied very greatly.

The Roman Catholic Church and Russian Orthodox Church have contributed to Japan in many ways, too.

And, I must tell you about the post-World War II religions in Japan. In chaotic postwar period several new religions took root in Japan. The two most prominent are the *Soka Gakkai* and the *Rissho Kosei Kai*. The former declared membership of 10 million people; the latter claims 3 million.

World War II put Japan into a miserable situation. Policy, education and finance could not save Japan from that condition. All Japanese were striving to live and they were looking for salvation. The new Constitution guarantees absolute freedom of faith, and it is said that more than 1,200 new religions came into being within 10 years. They all taught salvation from poverty and sickness. But recently, in many ways, Japan became very prosperous, especially in the fields of heavy industry and medical supplies. They can obtain large salaries, and many kinds of sickness can be easily cured. So the new religions are losing their religious aims, even though they are financially better off.

The Japanese people work very hard, but they are losing something very important. Their hearts

and spirits are becoming vacant. As you know, the number of people who commit suicide in Japan is very high. It shows that money, social rank, education, law, moral and so-called religion can not save them from their hopelessness. So the people are beginning to look for a more meaningful religion.

Recently I visited a Buddhist priest to ask cooperation for the sake of poor children, but he refused me, saying, “We do not want to take additional responsibility for poor children. I have money enough, so I don't have to work any more. I have many members who support me. If I have 7 funeral services a month the income from those is enough to cover my expenses for living....”

It is true that Christians and Christian churches are working for people and society. But there are so many denominations in Christian churches: Last year 103 denominations sent their missionaries to Japan. Are they cooperating with each other? And most of them teach a rather pessimistic and conservative Christianity; they require creedal faith, teaching the trinity, original sin, atonement, endless punishment, etc. These are not suitable for present-day Japanese. Many young people who are disappointed with traditional and formal Buddhism and Shintoism, or with the superstitious new religions, are looking for faith elsewhere. So they visit Christian churches, and what do they find there? How do they feel there? There are very few liberal Christian churches in Japan. There is only one Unitarian, and two Universalist churches – in Tokyo, and in Komagane. And I am the only ordained minister serving full time for a liberal church in Japan. Many Japanese and religious workers are awaiting the time to be awakened by the love of God revealed by Jesus.

What can wake Japanese from their deep sleep? I believe in the words of St. Paul and the writer of the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John -

LOVE NEVER FAILS, LOVE IS ETERNAL, LOVE IS FOREVER. GOD IS LOVE.

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UUA Inactive Ministers Files  
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