

Initiation in *Aimai* (Ambiguity): A Cultural Perspective from Japan

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Like many other Anglican churches today, the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (NSKK, the Anglican Communion in Japan) has an original prayer book written in Japanese. Historically, like other provinces in the Communion, an Anglican prayer book meant a vernacular version of 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, with some modification for adaptation. All the prayer books published in Japan had been along this line until the 1959 Prayer Book. It was the first prayer book of NSKK which can claim to be really original; it incorporated many new perspectives that emerged from the twentieth-century liturgical movement, and was among the first efforts in a trend toward prayer book revision in the Communion. Some foreign scholars were quite critical of the 1959 Prayer Book because it deviated from the Anglican tradition of the 1662 *BCP*, until their provinces started revisions of the same sort. The 1959 Prayer Book was well loved by many people, and it took more than thirty years to see the next revision.¹

The current NSKK Prayer Book was published in 1990. This prayer book has many new characteristics, but the most drastic change for people's eyes was the language used for the liturgy. In the 1959 Prayer Book, the liturgical language was traditional Japanese, while notes and rubrics were in contemporary (colloquial) Japanese. But the 1990 Prayer Book uses contemporary language for both the liturgies and the notes and rubrics, and many people have hesitated to recite sentences in contemporary Japanese in the liturgy. Other new elements, including the introduction of the greeting in the peace, likewise prompted objections. This negative impression of the liturgical language and gesture of the 1990 Prayer Book was so strong that it took some time before people noticed the new features implemented in the

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¹ See John M. Yoshida, "Japan: Nippon Sei Ko Kai," in Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, eds., *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 393–396.

liturgies. This focus on the language and gesture used in the liturgies may mean that not enough attention was paid to the revolutionary nature of the 1959 Prayer Book when it was introduced as well.

Theologically, the 1990 Prayer Book revision is based on “a shift from penitential feeling to an emphasis on thanksgiving,” as well as a clear sense of the church as a community and as a people who participate in the *missio Dei* in the world.² I will try to show one example of such theological changes in the revision from the initiation service, especially about the second point.

The 1959 Prayer Book was revolutionary in the initiation rites. It combined the traditional three different rites of infant baptism, private baptism, and adult baptism into one single rite. This need arose from Japan’s cultural circumstances, where Christians are in the minority and adult baptism is more popular. But the theology of baptism itself was not basically changed.

The 1990 Prayer Book’s initiation rites, however, made an intrinsic revision. The revision commission consulted several contemporary prayer books, such as the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church and the 1980 *Alternative Service Book* of the Church of England, as well as the text of Hippolytus. As a result, the rite is based on a baptismal ecclesiology which emphasizes that the church is a community of all the baptized. In other words, the rite puts more emphasis on incorporating the newly baptized into the church than on the personal conversion of the newly baptized Christian.

One cultural adaptation in the 1990 Prayer Book is the new rite introduced at the beginning of the Initiation section, called A Liturgy for Becoming a Catechumen, a candidate for baptism. This was one of the appendices in the 1959 Prayer Book, but it is now a part of the initiation. Though its use is not mandatory, this rite clearly shows that initiation is a process, which begins by one’s willingness to be baptized. This initial step in becoming a Christian is important for the church in Japan, where very few people in the society have been baptized. It is a big hurdle for people who feel sympathy to Christianity to decide to be baptized. Therefore, they sometimes need to do something at the beginning of the process.

According to the NSKK’s statistics in 2011, only 436 people were baptized that year: 124 were infants, and 312 were adults. This number is very small considering the population of Japan, which in 2010

² Yoshida, “Japan: Nippon Sei Ko Kai,” 395–396.

was about 128 million. One diocese had just thirteen people baptized in 2011, and only one of those thirteen was an infant. The number of the baptized is small, and adult baptism is the majority. I see most major denominations experiencing such a decline in the number of baptized people in Japan. This situation is not just for Anglicans; it is a question about the society.

I now work as a high school chaplain, and there are many students who feel sympathy to Christianity. Some of them want to commit to chapel services, and quite often they consider being baptized, but only a few of them can actually be baptized. There are a number of reasons for this, but the most common cause of rejection is opposition from their parents. It sometimes causes an unhappy split in a group of students, because some could be baptized while some could not.

Why do the parents resist their children who want to be baptized? In short, they just cannot imagine what it *is* to be baptized. I can explain to the parents what it *means* to be baptized, but these two are totally different things. In Japan affiliating with one specific religious denomination is extraordinary.

I have a friend who was born into a family that does not have a specific family religion. However, he studied at Jesuit schools from his junior high years until he graduated from college. During his school life, he found the Roman Catholic faith to be the most natural for him, and the most persuasive. Still, he did not decide to be baptized. He had his personal wish to be baptized as a Roman Catholic some day in the future, possibly when he would be around sixty! There were some reasons for this late baptism. First, he was concerned about the possible objection from his parents; he thought they might not be alive when he turned sixty. Second, as a *kaisha-in* (company employee) in Japanese society who is loyal to his responsibility at the *kaisha* (company), he did not want to spend any extra effort for complicated things, such as becoming a Roman Catholic, while being a regular full-time worker. Lastly, since belonging to a specific religious tradition is not popular in Japan, he preferred not to be seen as a person outside of the mainstream. It seemed to him that people would be less likely to see it that way at his retirement age.

In my own school, such things happen quite often. After graduating from our high school, most of the students proceed to the affiliated university. Some students who wanted to be baptized during their high school life but could not because their parents did not

agree are baptized after they become university students, when they turn adult age (twenty) so they can decide by themselves. But more often, such students just give up hoping to be baptized. And some of the parents of the students are also sympathetic to Christianity, but very rarely are they baptized.

These examples can provide some explanations as to how and why being baptized in Japanese society can be so difficult. But I do not think that our prayer book fully reflects such cultural characteristics in our initiation liturgy. A Liturgy for Becoming a Catechumen can be seen as a part of such efforts, but still most people's idea is that a new person is introduced to their congregation so that the person will become a member later on. Their new initiation liturgy invites them to welcome the candidate who is starting the baptismal process into the community and nurture the one in the community, but I am not sure how much people actually pay attention to that person's hesitation and efforts to make such a big decision.

It is often said that the church should open its door to everybody. Then how can the church in Japan articulate that? The liturgical movement's emphasis on baptismal ecclesiology has been a powerful influence toward widening the basis of the church, especially in those cultures where there is a large number of baptized people in the society regardless of their connection to local churches. But if the same idea is copied in Japan, it may become just a variation of the idea of the chosen people, and as a result it excludes many people who are not, and in some cases cannot be, baptized. In this case, the church consists of "elites," those who dare to choose to be baptized. I do not think that this is a good model for our society.

Kenzaburo Oe, a novelist who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1994, gave the title "Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself" to his Nobel Lecture. This title is based on that of the Nobel Lecture of Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese winner of the prize in 1968, "Japan, the Beautiful and Myself." Oe says that Kawabata's lecture is characterized by a word "vague," but he wants to explain himself as "ambiguous." Interestingly, these two words are the same in original Japanese: *aimai*. His distinction between these two English translations is based on the attitude toward the word *aimai*. Kawabata's *aimai*, vagueness, in one sense rejects the possibility of using words to express the truth; his emphasis is on understanding beyond words, Oe says. But Oe is more attracted to express his *aimai* as ambiguity. He claims that modernization of Japan has been done with peculiar

ambiguity; Japan has absorbed Western civilization while it strongly maintains its own traditional culture.³

I see the same ambiguity, *aimai*, in the church in Japan. It imported many things, including Western liturgies and theologies, from the churches in Europe and America in the beginning, and still does so, while the society maintains its culture as very different from those cultures.

What I believe with Christianity in Japan is that Japan is not—and probably never will be—a country where Christians constitute a majority of the society. At the same time, there are still a number of people who are not Christians in the customary sense of being baptized members of the church, but who are with the church as “sympathizers” or “understanding guests.” God works in Japan in a different way, and not a small number of people are allowed to be embraced in the church with such ambiguity. While Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian” has been controversial in the wider church, I see it as a very helpful way of understanding what is happening in Japan.

The open-door image of the church is based on an assumption that the church is a community which has a clear boundary around it. The purpose of initiation is thus to join the community by going through and beyond the border. I believe, however, the border of the church is not dichotomous; it is something more appropriately shown by gradations of expression. The church may be, especially the church in Japan should be, lived in *aimai*, and it needs a variety of liturgical rites that express its embrace of people who seek to live within the church in multiple and various ways.

Traditional religions in Japan do not require any specific initiation process for being a member. Typically, Buddhists become so because it is their home religion, and people’s affiliation with Shinto shrines is based on their habitation area. It is natural for such people to acknowledge the fact that they are Buddhist or Shintoist when it becomes necessary. For instance, a friend of mine who is a Buddhist priest once said that becoming a Buddhist personally, which means without family relationships, is difficult, and he sees it as a weakness of Buddhism. Such people may believe in the faith of Buddhism, but cannot become a member of a Buddhist temple. And since his temple

³ Kenzaburo Oe, “Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself,” December 7, 1994; http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1994/oe-lecture.html.

is old and big there are many projects that require help from members of the temple. Many of the dedicated members are over sixty, which is a popular retirement age. When they realize it is time to return to their Buddhist temples, they can do so. Then what can the church provide for such people in our society?

One possibility I see for the church in Japan is different levels of commitment services, rather than one single initiation service. In my experience this variety works well in schools, for example. Our college and high school chapel hosts many special services, in addition to weekly or daily regular services. As a high school chaplain, my school year always starts with the entrance ceremonial service. This is an opportunity for freshmen to make a commitment to becoming students of the school, and for current students to renew their commitment. In spring and in summer, some sports clubs have a special service for the blessing and bestowal of uniforms. Then at the graduation service they go into the wider society with their own new commitment. Some of them will be back to the chapel for their marriage, a lifelong commitment for the couple. But it is not necessary for couples to be baptized even when they want to marry in the Christian way; they just take time to learn about Holy Matrimony from the chaplains. I once celebrated a silver wedding anniversary service. Both members of the couple are the graduates of the university, and their children now study there. In this sense, the anniversary service held at the chapel meant a lot to the family, even though none of the family members are baptized. Through these services, the students can have a feeling of being connected with the chapel. Most of them are not, and will not be, baptized, but still they are in communion with the church through these chapel services. I see this as one of the ways to live out being Christians in *aimai*.

We are going to start the process of prayer book revision again in the near future, and as a member of the Liturgical Commission of the NSKK, I am trying to find out what kind of initiation liturgy can express this *aimai* character of being members of the church in Japan. I hope our next revision of the prayer book will be the starting point of building our own initiation liturgy, incorporating the theology of *aimai*.