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Prejudice Against Religion in Japan -And its influence on Proselytism Of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints-

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Shawna M. Lawlor, Dainan Skeem, L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee Library

Introduction

Despite missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints sharing the Gospel in Japan since 1901, its membership reaches only a little over 128,000, which is approximately one in every 1000 people living in Japan. There have been numerous theories concerning the relatively slow progress of the Church there. However, as I analyzed interviews of Japanese converts, I noticed a common theme in each of their stories; each convert had mentioned that before their conversion to the Gospel, they viewed religion to be something strange and suspicious. Having been born and raised in Japan, I agree that this is a perspective that most Japanese people have concerning religion as a whole-with the exception of Buddhism and Shintoism which play such a big part in Japanese history and have naturally been engraved as a part of the culture. This suggests that the difference between Western and Japanese perspectives on religion may be responsible for the Japanese people’s reluctance to embrace the doctrines of the Church. This thought made me curious to know the relationship between religious prejudice and openness towards the Church in different countries. Through this research we explored the viewpoint of religion as seen by Japanese society and aimed to identify its effects on the acceptance of Christianity, specifically the teachings of the Church.

Methodology

This research was conducted as an inclusive part of Dainan Skeem’s study on Japanese Culture and Mormonism in Japan and Hawaii. The interviews from Japan were conducted in Japanese, which I assisted in transcribing and then translating into English. There were 19 interviews including 21 participants who joined the Church in various times of their lives, ranging from early childhood to as an adult with grown children. We studied the stories of these Japanese converts, in which they described their perceptions of religion before and after their conversion.

Results

Interview narratives reveal that prior to their encounter with the Church, individuals predominantly viewed all religion-except Buddhism and Shintoism-with suspicion. Furthermore, prior to encountering the teachings of the Church, interviewees commonly associated organized religion with cult behaviors and ulterior political motives and cite these suspicions as a primary barrier to accepting religion. One participant specifically mentioned that when Japanese people hear about religious groups, they are reminded of Aum Shinrikyo, a cult group that committed religious terrorism in Japan in the 1980s and the 1990s. Many others agreed that religion in general has a negative impression of brainwashing, and that those who join religion are seen as being odd or weak for relying on an unknown entity.
Several participants also explained that Japanese people have a hard time understanding the concept of religion. It is culturally acceptable in Japan to participate in celebrations of many different religions throughout their lives. People go to shrines to celebrate New Years, have weddings in protestant chapels, put their children in Catholic schools, have Buddhism funerals, and celebrate Christmas each year. It is normal in Japan to take in different aspects of many religions and considered abnormal to belong to a specific non-Buddhist or non-Shinto religion. The narratives particularly revealed struggles with social identities and culturally-influenced perceptions as they gradually came to find identification with the Church. For instance, several described that following their conversion, they felt that prior acquaintances avoided association with them because of their membership in organized religion. Additionally, many converts maintain a dual identification with Mormonism and Buddhism, as they participate in various cultural activities and display Buddhist symbols in their household. In the past, dual identification has created conflicts, but seems to be changing in modern times. For instance, as the Church has incorporated Japanese cultural symbols in the architecture of the newly constructed temple in Sapporo, some individuals feel that they are able to be involved in local cultural activities without being in conflict with their membership in the Church. As a result, suspicions toward the Church may be declining as modern church members in Japan feel more comfortable incorporating dual identities with Japanese culture and Church membership.

Discussion

Although the negative impression of religion seems to be hindering the wide acceptance of the Gospel in the country, this may only be the surface of the problem. This prejudice is perhaps caused by the people’s inability to see religious affiliation as a necessity. Furthermore, it can be said that many Japanese people are indifferent to the topic of religion and do not consider it to be an important part of their identity, thus holding a prejudice against those who associate with a specific faith.

Conclusion

Through this research we came to see that Japanese prejudice on religion may be influencing the greater success of the Church’s missionary work in the country. This research is necessarily limited because we were only able to analyze the interviews of converts in Japan. We hope to further our research by studying the experiences of Japanese converts in Hawaii to see how the Japanese culture influenced their conversion outside of a Japanese social environment.