

## Contextualizing Luther in Contemporary Japan<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Most well-known next to Jesus

Among ordinary people in Japan, it is not an exaggeration to say that Martin Luther is the most well-known Christian next to Jesus Christ himself. There is no such statistical ground to prove my hypothesis, but judging from the facts regarding the books available for adults and children, and from references in the textbooks of world history and ethics at schools, my guess is probably not far from the truth. Mother Teresa may be another figure that is very popular and respected. Thus, if popularity is a measure, Augustine, Calvin, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other thinkers, theologians, educators, and activists cannot compete with Luther.

Japan has been recognized as a country that succeeded in achieving modernization first among Asian countries by introducing western civilization in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, as the national motto of the Meiji government, “Japanese spirit and Western learning” suggests, Christianity has not been able to gain many adherents and the Christian population

has remained a very tiny minority. Christianization did not take place along with Modernization or Westernization, in spite of the fact that Christian contributions in many fields such as culture, art, music, education, social welfare, medicine and so on, have been great.

In this historical and social background, Martin Luther is known as the reformer and founder of Protestant churches, and as the one who made the shift into the modern age possible (although he himself lived at the last stage of the Middle Ages). It is interesting to see that within Japanese Christian churches in 1917, Protestants celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation while Roman Catholics harshly criticized Luther and his Reformation. It seems that intellectuals were very aware of this event. I am really looking forward to seeing what will happen in Japanese society in 2017 when Lutherans celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation with several enterprises including the joint worship service with the Roman Catholic Church.

### 2. An image of Luther in 1917

As I mentioned above, ninety-seven years ago in 1917 there were celebrations and me-

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morial events at the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. At that time, what do you think attracted people inside and outside of the Christian church? The most impressive image of the Reformer, according to the biographies and essays published at that time, was his being free and independent against the spiritual authority of the Roman Catholic Church represented by Pope Leo X and the secular authority of the Holy Roman Empire represented by Emperor Karl V.

It might not be so difficult to criticize corrupt and depraved customs in the church at that time, but it might have been very difficult to criticize the teachings of the church which had been maintained as infallible for centuries under the authority of the Pope as a substitute for God. Those who criticized the church found their lives threatened, as all secular and political power was in the hands of the Emperor who had the power of life and death. Nevertheless, Luther would not change his mind or position and said, "Here I stand!" His firm religious conviction might be changed only if reason and biblical understanding were to accept those ideas which criticized his own.

A century ago, Japanese intellectuals appreciated Luther's mind and spirit of freedom and independence from and against any outside authority, as the mind and spirit of the Modern Age, in contrast to that of the Middle Ages. Luther was regarded as a hero who opened the door to the modern period. For those who lived in the transition period from feudalistic or pre-modern Japan, when an extended family system, village system or Imperial state system restrained the freedom of the individual in Japan, Luther was indeed respected as a champion of liberation. At the threshold of the post-modern period when bonds among the members of a

family and the people in their communities are becoming weaker and weaker, and egocentric life-styles are becoming more widespread, the image of Luther must be revised with a new insight, or become more balanced in response to today's world.

### 3. Sola gratia

As the very radical slogans of "Sola Gratia" and "Sola Fide" show, all the teaching of Luther has the unique and exclusive characteristics against human nature. The Latin word "sola" would not allow any room for human efforts or religious training to attain salvation. "Justification by grace alone through faith alone" is the essence of Lutheran understanding of salvation just as Epistle Paul teaches. We have no interest in reexamining the "synergism" controversy between Philippists and Gnesio-Lutherans in the late 1550s, which took place concerning the claim that the human will could cooperate with the divine grace to achieve salvation. After the controversy, the Lutheran position is clear.

If we get a bird-eye view of the world history, a stream of realization of the autonomy of human spirit and mind is visible from 13<sup>th</sup> century on in the west (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). The realm for religion had been narrowed into the inner world at the age of enlightenment which Kant represents. Even though the religion could survive in the modern age, and "God" did not die as Nietzsche prophesied in his *Zarathustra*, the role of God seems to have been reduced or weakened and that of human beings has been enlarged or strengthened in return in the eyes of ordinary people.

Is the religious truth of God's all and exclusive activity of salvation (Paul Althaus) still valid? Let us see the religions of *sola gratia*

first. Besides Bakhti religion in India, Jodo-shin sect of Japanese Buddhism must be typical in this regard.

As Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, called Shinran (親鸞) and the Mahayana True Pure Land sect (浄土真宗) that he founded, “Japanese Protestantism,” we should also be aware of one of Japan’s religious traditions which has some serious commonality with Luther’s teaching of justification by grace through faith. Though it does not share the name of Jesus Christ, it does have the name of Amitabha or Amida Buddha (阿弥陀佛) who made the vow not to become a Buddha or Tathagata (如来), or to enter into the Pure Land (浄土) or the land of Perfect Bliss (極楽), unless people around the world also become Buddhas and enter into the Pure Land. By the immeasurable mercy of Amitabha, and through the invocation of Amitabha, one can be saved. We cannot deny that this structure of salvation taught by Shinran is also very similar to that of Luther’s justification by grace through faith.

Shinran also taught, very paradoxically, that if a good person can be saved, then why not also an evil person. By saying this, he emphasized the strong will of the savior Amitabha to save those who cannot save themselves because of their sinfulness or wickedness. Shinran showed the thoroughly penetrating salvation-religion of grace alone. The only thing that the sinner has to do is to trust in the savior by intoning the Pure Land Buddha’s name “Namu-Amida-Butsu (南無阿弥陀佛).”

Rennyo (蓮如), the eighth successor of Shinran, was a great evangelist and excellent organizer of the sect. He was successful in maintaining the essence of Shinran’s teaching to sinners, while developing many popular literatures and hymns that ordinary people could understand

and recite easily. His style of evangelism focused not on the individual, but on the family. Introducing various religious systems and practices which affected people’s daily lives, such as the funeral service, family tomb, veneration of the ancestors, memorial service of the dead (to which Shinran paid little interest), Rennyo helped grow the True Pure Land sect widely and rapidly. Only this religious body was able to use armed resistance against Oda Nobunaga (織田信長) who tried to unite and rule Japan during a period of rival warlords and civil wars, known as the Sengoku Period (戦国時代, 1467-1573), which coincided with the decades after Luther’s death in Europe.

Shinran’s severe struggle of the soul, the joyful experience of the revelation of the mystery of salvation, and his deep reflection and thought, combined with Rennyo’s great spiritual skills for evangelism toward ordinary people and his organizational abilities, made possible the birth and development of the largest religious body in Japan.

Although Buddhism as a whole is known as an awakening or enlightenment religion (覚知/悟道宗教), Mahayana Buddhism, unlike Theravada Buddhism, is by and large a salvation-religion (救済宗教). What I would like to say is not that this “Japanese Protestantism” helped Christian Protestantism become accepted by Japanese people more easily because the salvation-religion is not foreign to Japanese people. It is actually very familiar to them. Among the many Buddhist sects in Japan, the True Pure Land sect is the largest one. It is often said that such regions as Kaga (Ishikawa) and Aki (Hiroshima) are the areas where Christian evangelism faces the most difficulties.

From our experiences in Japan where a Buddhism of sola gratia is dominant, the deep

insights on humanity which recognize sin, evil and weakness or powerlessness of human being, any religion cannot remain as a religion of self-help or justification by one's effort. One must admit that one cannot save oneself. This is still true after Luther 500 years ago or Sinran 750 years ago. Salvation religion is still needed.

#### 4. Prosperity theology/gospel

Today Asia has grown to be called a growth center for global economy. The country of the GNP Number Two in the world is China, and Number Three Japan. Many other countries also have developed its economic and industrial power and raised a living standard of the people by making use of rich natural resources and huge population, good quality of labor force, and big market. Global economy, neo-liberalism, fierce completion, and market principle threaten the weak economy as well as individual life and give a chance for success.

Does this time of economic and industrial development need or allow flourishing a kind of a religion which encourages people to engage in economic activities more vigorously, seeking a life of prosperity more and more, leaving behind that of poverty? Prosperity theology or Prosperity gospel is a name of a religion which teaches personal empowerment proposing that it is God's will for his people to be happy. The atonement is interpreted to include the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are viewed as curse to be broken by faith. Is it not common to see religious desire to receive this-worldly divine grace in this part of the world? Japanese religiosity is not an exception.

Prosperity theology/gospel became prominent with the background of New Thought movement and Word of Faith movement since

1800s, and along with televangelism since 1960s. Some Charismatic movement leaders emphasized this trend. It was not only in the USA where this new religious emphasis has in fashion but in many parts of the world as well.

Are we Lutherans also not tempted to adopt this prosperity theology/gospel in our ministry? Do we speak something relevant to the daily life including health and wealth of the congregation members from the pulpit? Luther teaches us to ask God to give in his Small and Large Catechism as follows:

"Let us outline very briefly how comprehensively this petition covers all kinds of earthly matters". "For example, we might ask God to give us food and drinks, clothing, house and farm, and a healthy body". "In addition, we might ask God to cause the grain and fruits of the field to grow and thrive abundantly". The exposition of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer keeps listing many things such as family members, friends, good rulers, and protection from all kinds of harm of natural disasters and social disorders in Large Catechism.

It is very clear that the God of the Bible does care the material welfare as well as spiritual welfare. He allows us to pray for "daily bread" which is necessary for our life telling that "God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving" in Small Catechism.

This shows the genuine and pure trust in God who provides free and gracious gifts of all that is necessary for one's life and nothing else. No attempt of bargaining with God or manipulating him in order to attain prosperous health and wealth. I would like to mention that Prosperity theology or gospel has nothing to do with

Luther's teaching about the fourth petition to ask God's gifts for bodily and materially welfare.

## 5. Justification by grace alone

Now it is time to speak about the central theological issue of Luther's Reformation; namely, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. His teaching was sharply contrasted with that of works righteousness. There is no need to explain what "works righteousness" meant at the time of the late Middle Ages. All the piety and practice of the church was grounded in the teaching of works righteousness through the famous principle "*facere quod in se est*," which meant that God gives grace to those who do what is within them.

I would like to develop this argument of works righteousness within the contemporary situation today. In today's world, as I told in the previous chapter, the global economy and neo-liberalism prevail, along with what is called result-ism, efficiency-ism and a fierce market-ism with its bare competition-ism that is predominant all over the world, including Japan. The law of the jungle, where the weak become the victims of the strong, rules the world, even though it is said that a fair start is guaranteed for all people. Yet, in the field of economy, is this not just another expression of works righteousness?

The introduction of prenatal diagnosis has caused selective abortion to become more widely and more easily available. After a new testing method called "non-invasive prenatal genetic testing (NPT)" was introduced, the number of those pregnant women who take this diagnosis has increased because of its easy and convenient method. But, without hesitation, an overwhelming majority of pregnant women choose

abortion if the result of a diagnosis is positive regarding the chromosomal aberration because they want to have a healthy or "perfect" baby.

Can we simply say that it cannot be helped; we cannot bring up a child with disability; he/she must be unhappy? One of the reasons to promote a prenatal diagnosis in some country is the amount of the social cost for a life-long support in social welfare, medicine and education for the people with disability in comparison with the cost for the campaign of prenatal diagnosis.

To what extent will our Asian countries welcome or be able to endure the growing population of the aged, the physically disabled or those who are mentally handicapped – those who are regarded as less or non-productive? What lies behind these phenomena is an idea deeply rooted in the life-philosophy of works righteousness, or the principle of "*facere quod in se est*." Can you imagine the world or society with only "healthy" or "perfect" people?

I am trying to relate a teaching of works righteousness and justification by grace alone through faith alone to contemporary issues in Japan in such fields as market economy and bioethics. My conviction is, as I have explained in my previous papers read in Malaysia, that Luther's revolutionary, counter-cultural teaching of justification by grace through faith potentially means a lot to the contemporary social, economic and cultural situation. This teaching of justification by preceding grace tells us that a loving God gives grace to humanity without any merit on the part of humanity. From God's point of view, it is only our Being that matters, not our Doing. We are unconditionally accepted by God as we are.

What we need to do is to reinterpret Luther's teaching of justification, which has been understood as a teaching about the forgive-

ness of sin, atonement and redemption attained by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and expand the context in which salvation takes place. Soteriology deals with how the salvation of sinners happens and with what sin is. Sin is often understood in moralistic terms as “evil-doing,” *hubris*, or *concupiscentia*. However, sin must be interpreted in its relational sense, not in its ontological sense, if we would like to remain Lutheran. Relational understanding of sin necessarily needs a more holistic understanding of human beings, as the ones who have been created and are loved as partners in the life of the living God. Men and women have multiple dimensions of life, i.e., psychological and mental dimensions as well as physical and social dimensions, all of which are integrated by a spiritual dimension. Therefore, it is not wrong to include sin as one of the threats against human existence in the world. As I mentioned above, the value of human beings should not be measured by their productivity or efficiency. Works righteousness should not have room in this regard. Human disability must not be allowed to affect human dignity *coram Deo*. Human beings can only be appropriately valued *extra nos*, on the basis of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Otherwise, human beings will be measured only by the extent to which they are useful for specific purposes as “human material” (人材).

*Theologia crucis* discusses not only the way in which God reveals God’s self in the suffering of Christ on the cross, but also God’s critical judgment on the sin of the world. Together with Liberation Theology, we could hold that the cross is the sign of victory over all the powers that stand against God and human beings, and the means of overcoming suffering. It is our task to find a solution to the situations of victims of the contemporary works righteous-

ness value system in Japan and other countries in Asia.

## 6. Disasters and eschatological way of living

It is not only Japan that was terribly damaged by earthquake, tsunami or typhoon. Ten years ago December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, a great earthquake and tsunami took place off Sumatra followed by the terrible disaster in wide area of southeast Asia, India and east Africa. We cannot forget the great earthquake and tsunami which struck Eastern Japan followed by the meltdown of Fukushima nuclear powerplant in March 11, 2011. Last year more than 8000 people died and 10 million affected by typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines.

All of us experience natural disasters, big or small, everywhere. We also experience a works of diakonia everywhere. I will speak about the diakonia of the church in the following chapter.

Theological discussion on theodicy cannot be avoided. But, as long as the idea of the suffering God is shared, we will not speculate the theodicy issue, rather anthropodicy becomes a matter. According to the *theologia crucis* of Luther, we must develop the idea of the suffering God when people are suffering. I am not prepared to develop this theological issue of the suffering God today, but let me share with you a very interesting phenomenon which took place after “3.11,” or more properly, the “2011 Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami” and the terrible Fukushima nuclear power plant accident of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Uncountable information, messages and stories (official and unofficial) were transmitted from person to person via various media including the internet. What kind of message would

you expect to hear in the midst of fear, anxiety, disappointment, trouble, confusion, and a lack of hope or a desire to live? To my surprise, the message that was most often heard, spoken and transmitted was as follows: “Even if tomorrow were the last day of this world, I would plant an apple tree today.” It goes without saying that these are words attributed to Martin Luther. His name was attached to this saying when it was shared from person to person. But, it is also true that it is not possible to prove that Luther himself said or wrote this brief but heart-touching message. It is not possible to find this saying recorded on some page in one of the 100 volumes of the *Weimarer Ausgabe*. Rather there are several hypotheses about when and who coined this famous phrase, which is now attributed to Luther. This saying was a great comfort and encouragement to the victims of the 2011 disaster. His saying has helped them live daily life with hope, even though the damage is enormous; the victims’ sorrow is easily overcome; and overcoming the sense of loss and rebuilding the community as it used to be, is an enormous task.

More than thirty years ago, Mrs. Momoko Harazaki, the spouse of a pastor, suffered from cancer at the fourth and last stage, but in spite of this, she decided to keep helping her eldest son do his English homework and continued to take care of her little second son from her bed in the hospital. It was this saying attributed to Luther that she loved, “Even if tomorrow were the last day of this world, I would plant an apple tree today,” that supported her. Her spirit, prayer life, and way of living for her family members at this stage of her illness was maintained, or rather strengthened, by her eschatological hope which was formed and supported by these words of one who has a deep faith and

a genuine trust in his savior Jesus Christ.

Since then, many terminal stage cancer patients have received spiritual care and support through this saying attributed to Luther or written by someone influenced by Luther’s eschatological faith and hope. Many or most of these patients may never have attended worship service at a church where the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone is being taught. In a country where the name of Luther is well-known but little is known of his teaching, I was surprised but also so happy to learn, that Luther’s saying has been so widely circulated and has contributed so much to the spiritual care and well-being of terminally-ill patients and those persons who have been terribly damaged through the loss of hope. It also makes me wonder, if, in addition to Japan, this might also be the case for other Asian countries?

## 7. Diakonia

One of Luther’s most popular writings is *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) which begins with two paradoxical statements: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none,” and “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” As I previously said in earlier papers, Lutherans in Japan were active in developing social services including the running of social welfare institutions. Three years ago when the great earthquake and tsunami assaulted the eastern part of Japan, four Japanese Lutheran church bodies, under the umbrella of “Japan Lutheran Emergency Relief,” together with the LWF and many overseas Lutheran churches, developed a three-year project called “Lutheran *Tonaribito*” (Lutheran Neighbors), and with the help of many church members, experienced various *diakonia* service activities on

the national and congregational church level.

Through this experience as a church, *diakonia* was once again recognized as an essential part of the mission of the Christian church, and not merely a “tool” or “aid” in evangelism. *Diakonia* can only be performed on the basis that we are blessed - abundantly blessed - by God's grace in Christ, which has made us “perfectly free” and “subject to none.” Therefore, we are ready to serve others in need as “a perfectly dutiful servant of all” and “subject to all.”

This Christian way of life or ethics is more than an ethics of “give-and-take” or “mutual aid (互助).” Today's social welfare system is going to shift from the public aid (公助), to private aid (自助) with mutual aid. Mutual aid is necessary, but the partner may not always be able to give back in return, and that is why the spirit of *diakonia* is absolutely essential. A Lutheran understanding of *diakonia* with Luther's teaching of freedom, love and service has a unique message for people in society today.

## 8. Ecumenical dialogue

Martin Luther, a man of five hundred years ago, is still an eloquent speaker on behalf of God and Christ. His main theological message of justification by grace alone through faith alone remains a powerful and vocal statement which is still able to stand against the dominant philosophy of humanity and this world.

The ground of human life is not in his or herself, but is *extra nos*. This teaching should not be confined to the doctrine of soteriology with only the redemption or forgiveness of sin, but should be wide ranging to include the doctrine of creation as well. All living things, including humanity, are creatures *ex nihilo*. No one has the right to claim his or her existence's

dignity within only oneself. Our being has been declared “an *Imago Dei*” unconditionally and affirmed “very good” and “acceptable” wholeheartedly; and therefore, humans have dignity and rights even in this very competitive and “result” oriented society.

Because our being and life has been made alive by grace alone, we are responsible to living beings around us. We are responsible for not only justice and peace, but also for the necessary welfare of the environment. That is why contemporary environmental ethics are also defended and supported by Lutherans. The idea and practice of *diakonia* must be appreciated and performed by the church, people and its organizations.

The history of more than forty years of ecumenical dialogue has proved that the Lutheran assertion is also an *ecumenical assertion*, together with the traditions of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. We are very happy that it is not only Lutherans but also fellow Christians of other traditions that will celebrate the 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation. Lutherans in Japan are in the process of preparing commemorative worship services with Roman Catholics and others in 2017. We must be confident that Luther's theological heritage is still both valid and challenging to us here in Asia as we stand at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## Note

- 1 This article is the text of a lecture delivered at the Third Asian Lutheranism Conference held in Medan, Indonesia, on November 16<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, sponsored by the Division of Mission and Development of the Lutheran World Federation. The author, Naozumi Eto, is President of Japan Lutheran College and has read consecutive papers each year since 2012, when the first conference was held in Kotakinabaru, Malaysia. This series of conferences is a joint effort of searching for and establishing Asian Lutheranism and Lutheran identity, and is expected to complete its mission in 2017.

In this article, under the main theme of the Theology of the Cross, the author attempts to contextualize Luther and his Theology of the Cross in contemporary Japan where the prevailing value-system seems to be the complete opposite of Luther's thought, and yet where, through the True Pure Land (*Jodo-shin*) teachings of Shinran, Buddhism has won large numbers of adherents, through the use of a faith-structure similar to that of Luther.

本稿は、世界ルーテル連盟宣教と発展部門主催で2014年11月16-22日にインドネシアのメダンで開催された「第三回アジアルター主義研究協議会」で発表された講演原稿である。講演者であるルーテル学院大学学長、江藤直純は2012年にマレーシアのコタキナバルで開催された第一回研究協議会から連続して講演を続けてきた。2017年にその任務を完了する予定のこの連続研究協議会はアジアにおけるルター主義とルター派のアイデンティティを探り樹立しようとの共同の努力の一環である。

十字架の神学というメインテーマの下で、講演者はルターと彼の十字架の神学とを、それと正反対の価値観が支配的であるように見える現代日本、また親鸞によって教えられたところの、ルターのそれと共通したあるいは類似した信仰の構造を持つ仏教の一派、すなわち浄土真宗が多数の門徒を擁しているこの現代日本の中でコンテクスチャライズ（文脈化）することを試みている。

