

Peaceful releasing: a Japanese way of reconciliation

REVD DAVID BUSK

David Busk reflects of tolerance and harmony, sharing the wisdom he has learned from his years in Japan.

‘**M**an against God, Man against Man. God against Nature, Nature against Man. Very funny religion.’ This (or something very like it – I can not remember where I read it) is a comment on Christianity by Daisetsu Suzuki (1870-1966), a Japanese Buddhist philosopher who was a pioneer in introducing Zen Buddhism and eastern thought in general to the English-speaking world. As a paid-up minister of this very funny religion, and living in Suzuki’s native land, I have found this remark to be a constant stimulus to thought since I first came across it. Suzuki was certainly not indulging in a

piece of anti-Christian invective. Religious controversy was alien to his style. His life’s work could be described as an attempt to replace ignorant antipathy with understanding, and indeed a distrust of confrontation seems to be part of the point of the opening quotation.

Once at an inter-religious conference he became involved in some kind of dispute with another delegate. After arguing his point forcefully, he abruptly undermined his own case by saying, ‘According to my own tradition, a special condemnation is reserved for those who argue over religion, so I have now sent myself to hell.’ For Suzuki, humour was a way of being tolerant and pacific, not contemptuous.

Division and reconciliation?

How is it then, that a man of Suzuki’s learning and breadth of experience – his wife was American, he spent much of

the author

Revd David Busk is a USPG missionary working with the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (the Anglican Church in Japan). He is a parish priest in Nagasaki.

his life teaching in the States? and wrote copiously in English as well as Japanese – could come to see the Christian faith as a series of antagonisms? Is there something intrinsically oppositional in what we proclaim? When Christians talk of reconciliation, are we often proposing to reconcile things that for many in Japan and elsewhere have never been seen as divided? The atonement theory of salvation articulated by Anselm certainly posits both a chasm between God and humanity, and also a fallen natural realm, that require the divine sacrifice of Christ to heal. Put exclusively in these terms, the gospel can indeed sound very alien to Japanese ears. What chasm? What fall?

I will not attempt to answer these questions fully here – that would require a book. I hope what I have to say may point towards where some answers may lie, as seen from a Japanese perspective, or at least the perspective of one trying to see through Japanese eyes. Let us first take a short detour through some elements of the Japanese language. The written language uses Chinese characters for most of its basic expression. One character that is particularly important to the self-understanding of the Japanese people is an ideogram (the proper term for Chinese characters) usually pronounced ‘wa’. (One character can often be



The Japanese ‘wa’ symbol.

pronounced in several different ways depending on context, while the meaning remains the same. This makes life interesting for the foreign language student.) This character usually pronounced ‘wa’ (hereafter simply ‘wa’) has the root meaning of ‘peace’ or ‘harmony’. The name the Japanese originally gave their land, before the name ‘Japan’ (Nippon) evolved, was Yamato, written with characters meaning ‘great peace’. The ‘peace’ element is a variant pronunciation of this same ‘wa’.

The Land of Great Peace

Put more simply, the idea of Japan as the land of Great Peace or harmony is of very ancient origin and is fundamental even now to how the nation understands itself. ‘Wa’ has come to mean Japanese as opposed to Western or Chinese. If you buy Japanese beef in Japan, to distinguish it from imported varieties it is labeled ‘wa-beef’. Japanese



David, Yoko and Simon Busk.

cuisine in general is ‘wa-cooking’, and almost anything made in an essentially or traditionally Japanese form, from cakes to paper to toilets, can be called ‘wa-style’. The ‘wa’ character is written by combining two elements, meaning respectively ‘to meet’ and ‘speech’. In other words, peace and harmony are the result of talking together, a sentiment to which we could all probably assent but which here has the force of a nation’s collective subconscious.

The creation and maintenance of ‘wa’ are primary social values. For example, although this is undoubtedly still a hierarchical society, in my experience decision-making is somewhat more consensual than in the

west. Any important decision will involve a great deal of talk – meetings can last hours and include meals – but argumentative debate is generally avoided. Opinions are expressed as personal feelings rather than the result of logical reasoning, and so can not be argued against as simply mistaken. What is felt is felt; the art of decision-making in Japan seems to be to get the emotions of the participants into accord. This non-dialectic process is ‘wa’, meeting and talking, in action, producing social harmony. The reality may of course often be more rough-edged than I have presented it, and hierarchical social structures may make this harmonizing of emotions coercive at times, but the

ideal remains, and despite growing tensions Japanese society still strikes the westerner, and is felt by most Japanese, to be essentially peaceful.

Of course as soon as one defines Japan as a land of peace, the western observer is liable also to detect an irony, to say the least, that sometimes seems to be obscure to many Japanese. To put it crudely, what about the war then? The irony is compounded by the fact that the name given to the reign of the late emperor Hirohito, under whom Japan engaged in almost fifteen years of war, was 'Showa' or 'bright peace'. That 'wa' again! I have neither the understanding nor here the space to attempt an explanation of how Japan fell into militarism. What I can do is speak from my own experience of living, working and communicating in Japan for eleven years, and a degree of identification with the land and its people that comes from that experience. Most profoundly that identification comes from marriage to a Japanese woman, from belonging in some sense to her extended family, and from the effort to raise children who will see themselves as Japanese at least as much as British. The outcome of this is that while I am not blind to the ironies of 'wa' as a shorthand for all things Japanese – what nation's self-mythologising is not replete with irony? – I see no need to be entirely cynical

about it. Most westerners living here find that in daily life there is a genuine attempt to make social activity as harmonious as possible, and while that can of course lead to an evasion of unpleasant truths, it would be simply false to deny the sheer pleasantness of this attempt.

A weariness of war

From this perspective as a non-native but partly rooted Christian resident of modern Japan, I sometimes feel a weariness that so many of my small-scale attempts to depict this country as I see it for any listeners or readers in Britain are drawn as if by some dark gravity to discussion of the war. There is so much more that is worth looking at here. But for many in the west the war is the sadly inevitable starting point in thinking about Japan and cannot be ignored. This seems to be as much a given as the 'wa' identity of the Japanese. If that is the case, is there a way of using both these datum points, 'wa' and 'the war', to look at the theme of reconciliation in a Japanese context, and to see what that might have to say to all who are concerned for the mission of Christ's church? What is divided? What awaits reconciliation?

I live in Nagasaki, a city that in many ways exemplifies the conundrum of the pacific qualities of this land and the shadow of its warlike recent past.

Nagasaki often means only one thing in the west, the second atom bomb and the cloud it has cast over all human history since then. What is less well known is that this city was the first place in Japan to have extensive contact with Europe, dating from the mid-sixteenth century; that Christian missionary work began here and the faith took root among the population in this area; that the ferocious and large scale persecution of Christians in the early seventeenth century was also most intense here; that here Christianity survived underground during Japan's era of seclusion from the 1700's to 1853; that Nagasaki was during that time the only place in Japan where a western presence was tolerated and so became Japan's window onto the western world; and that when Japan opened up to foreign trade again in the nineteenth century Nagasaki once more became the main point of entry for western technology. (A few yards from where I am writing this is the site where a Scottish entrepreneur called Thomas Glover set up the first railway tracks in Japan to give a demonstration of steam locomotion.) Here, then, Japan has tried and failed and tried again to reconcile herself to the western world and its influence upon her.

In this context, the atom bomb becomes the most terrible part of the sometimes terrible, sometimes splendid

story of the interaction of Nagasaki, and of Japan as a whole, with the west. Of the two cities to suffer atomic bombing, Hiroshima being the first is better known, and the commemorative monuments and annual events are on a larger scale than in Nagasaki. Two expressions that are rather hard to translate are sometimes used to describe the different ways in which the two cities have responded to their common tragedies. Hiroshima's memorial activities are called "the atom bomb of remembrance", while Nagasaki has 'the atom bomb of forgiveness.'

I have never been to Hiroshima, but certainly there is an atmosphere in Nagasaki's atomic bomb memorial museum, and throughout the city during the annual commemorations, that is difficult to define but feels quite free of rancour. There is of course sorrowful recollection, and the suffering of the victims is not over. We have a member of our church who is still picking out of her body the fragments of glass that were blown there by the bomb. Another, who died suddenly last year, suffered from poor health ever since she received a heavy dose of radiation from the bomb at the age of twelve. Still another, who also died last year, lost her parents and all five siblings to the bomb and was never able to talk about it. None of this is forgotten – the numbers at our annual memorial

service on 9 August grow each year – but I have never heard recrimination expressed towards America, nor indeed towards Britain, which was also a participant in the Manhattan Project that produced the bomb. Still less have I heard calls for an apology – the focus of Nagasaki’s memorial activities is first on remembrance and then on campaigning for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Thus in a certain sense, to be used only with caveats, Nagasaki is reconciled to the atomic bomb. Japan is used to natural disasters, and one of the things that first struck me when visiting the atomic bomb memorial museum was that the bombing is presented somewhat in the same terms as an earthquake or typhoon, almost as what we sometimes call an act of God. The exhibition shows scarcely any background or historical context before the effects of the bomb are displayed: out of a cloudless August sky an appalling visitation fell. Much of the exhibition is devoted to describing the bomb and its effects unemotionally in scientific detail. In our own church, those who experienced the bomb have given accounts of what they went through in the form of addresses at our memorial service, but their language is likewise surprisingly free of emotional content: this is what I saw, this is what happened to me.



The Children's Peace Monument at the Peace Memorial Park, Hiroshima.

The Japanese word for reconciliation is a two-character compound, ‘wakai’. The first is ‘wa’ again, and the second, ‘kai’, has a complex of meanings including ‘loosen’, ‘release’, ‘cancel’, ‘explain’, and ‘understand’. Reconciliation is thus a matter of peacefully coming to understand, or loosening and releasing obstructions until the difficulty is cancelled. The way information about the bomb is presented almost neutrally suggests that this bald description may actually be the practice of ‘wakai’, peaceful explanation and understanding leading to reconciliation.

“According to my own tradition, a special condemnation is reserved for those who argue over religion, so I have now sent myself to hell.”
(*Daisetsu Suzuki*)

In the West

Meanwhile, many of those who suffered as prisoners of war at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army remain unreconciled to their own pain and grief. This is emphatically not to judge those who have yet to find a way to reconciliation, but merely to point out how different understandings of the concept lead to different responses to injustice. Westerners tend to expect that reconciliation will involve some act of conferring or receiving forgiveness, some acknowledgment and absolution of guilt. However, I have witnessed something else take place among former far-east prisoners of war (FEPOWs) who have returned to Japan in recent years. The Agape movement for FEPOWs is run by Keiko Holmes, a Christian Japanese woman resident in Britain. For the past ten years or so, Agape has brought small groups of FEPOWs to Japan to help them shed some of the burden of the past. There have been some remarkable meetings between FEPOWs and their former captors, with forgiveness asked and given, but such encounters are

obviously difficult to arrange. Far more common has been the experience that simply in coming to contemporary, peaceful Japan and being welcomed as guests, FEPOWs have found their own peace, as I have heard them say many times.

A year ago I was standing outside the atom bomb museum here with a party of FEPOWs when a small girl of perhaps five, passing with her mother, took a shine to one of them who was in a wheelchair. They spent a while communicating in the way that the elderly and the very young often can, unhindered by their lack of a common language, and I do not think it is mere sentimentality to say that all of us there, Japanese and British, could see a kind of reconciliation taking place. It was truly a moment of gospel, of the good news of God with us, not proclaimed in speech but realized in an encounter.

This is how Japan communicates her peace, her ‘wa’: meeting and conversing. Often no words are necessary, still less acts of contrition and exculpation. In a land where there is no sense of a metaphysical division

between God and Man and Nature, where the sacred precincts of a shrine may include the commercial center of a town or cover an entire mountainside, where divinity comprises springs, rocks and ancient trees, heroic historical figures and mythical creatures as well as gods of sun and harvest, the fractures of the human heart are not emblematic of any deeper cosmological rift. We are already in harmony with nature, and the gods are really part of that harmony. This can all sound too easy, too soft, to Christians taught to regard original sin as the starting point of a fallen humanity's relationship with God. We often forget that repentance, our road to reconciliation with God, is an act of turning about, facing another way, or in other words looking in a new direction. That is what Japan has helped me to do. I do not want to idolise what Japan has to offer – heaven knows there is as much that needs gospel grace here as anywhere else – but only to state that that gospel, the way of the One whose burden is light and whose yoke is easy, is not something far off from here that needs to be brought closer, but has its own ready soil in this culture, as it does in all.

All things in harmony

Suzuki was giving an entirely understandable response when he defined Christianity as a set of dualistic antitheses – that is precisely how it is often presented. It is his own native land that has begun to show me how extraneous such a presentation is to the true gospel of all things in harmony with God. The way of 'wa' points to our truly original state, to the genesis of a cosmic order seen by God to be good, requiring not so much reconciliation as re-envisioning. This is perfectly expressed by a poem of Genzo Mizuno (1937-1984), who was paralyzed after an illness at the age of nine, and later became a Christian. He communicated by blinking his eyes, and in this way wrote his poetry. Below is a translation from the Japanese:

*Living
in the great hand of God
the snail
crawls as a snail should
the spiderwort
blooms as a spiderwort should
the green tree frog
croaks as a green tree frog should
and in the great hand of God
I
live as I should.*