

# Theological Background of Hymnody in Japan

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### 1. The history of Christian church and Hymn in Japan

It was in 1549 when Roman Catholic missionary Francisco de Xavier visited Japan firstly diffuse Christianity. He landed southern part of small island of Japan called “Tanegashima” and started his mission in Kyushu district. Since then, some other Catholic missionaries and priests joined the mission and expanded believers, but Japanese government implemented chained policy of “Sakoku” policy within a century in 1639, which banned trade and cultural exchange with overseas as well as Christianity. As a result, all the foreign Catholic priests and missionaries were banished outside of Japan, and the remaining Japanese Christians became crypto-Christians. In order to keep the faith secret, they had to change prayers and hymns into the unique ones. However it is a wonderful to think that those prayers and hymns were succeeded until now as “crypto-Christian Oratio”. It must be added that the religion of those crypto-Christians became totally a Japanese indigenous religion, and so it must be differentiated from the Christianity of Catholic churches introduced in late 19th century when the ban of Christianity was liberated.

The insular country, Japan, has implemented chained policy and the ban of Christianity for 234 years. Finally in 1873, the door for trade with European countries and for the missionary work of Christianity was officially re-opened. In the following year, each denomination of protestant churches published each hymnals separately. Each denomination means Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Anglican church. As those separated hymnals were revised again and again, it was seen that some common hymnals among some denominations were published.

The incunabulum of hymnal starting in 1874 accounts for eight. Some lifted less than 100 hymns. Following ones listed more than 100 hymns.

“SAMBIKA” = ‘HYMN’, Presbyterian, 1881

“SAMBIKA NARABINI GAKUFU” = ‘HYMN & TUNES’, Congregational, 1882

“SHINSEN-SAMBIKA” = ‘NEW HYMNAL’, joint edition of Congregational and Presbyterian, 1888

“KIRISUTOKYO-SEIKASHU” = ‘CHRISTIAN HYMNAL’, Methodist, 1884 (word-only edition), 1885 (word and music edition)

“KIRISUTOKYO-SAMBIKA” = ‘CHRISTIAN HYMN’, Baptist, 1896

About a quarter of a century after since the beginning of hymnal publishing in Japan, a proposal for editing and publishing a common hymnal was ratified in 1900, and three years

later in 1903, the first common hymnal was published, which is called “SAMBIKA” = ‘THE HYMN’ and consists of 485 hymns. In other words, this was done 101 years ago from today. The denominations that participated in editing this common hymnal are mainly Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist church.

At this time, the Anglican related, the Japan Anglican Church and Lutheran Church did not participated. During this period, Anglican Church edited its own hymnal called “KOKIN-SEIKASHU” = ‘HYMNS ANCIENT & MODERN’. Lutheran Church has used the common hymnal until 1974, when the Church acquired its own hymnal, “KYOUKAI-SAMBIKA” = ‘CHURCH HYMNAL’. In addition, Baptist published its own “SHINSEI-SAMBIKA” = ‘MEW LIFE HYMNS’ in 1989. Abreast with these hymnals, other hymnal were created by fundamental groups.

In the background of genealogy of hymns and hymnal publication in Japan, it is clear that Protestant churches were divided into two groups; denomination which lives upon traditional liturgy, kept its own hymns, while the other adapted common hymns.

Namely, Anglican related church and Lutheran church kept the liturgical tradition, and the remaining church did not persist in their liturgical traditions. Thus, even though we acquired the common hymnal in 1903, the typical feature, which is the core of hymn, is not really the song book for worship services for common church, but for the individual faith and personal devotion. The common hymn was free from the theology of worship of each denomination, but it lacked the theology of liturgy. And so, the hymns and hymnals that were used in worship were relatively weak and poor in terms of practice.

The common hymnal, which is firstly published in 1903, was revised many times. The first revised edition was published in 1931, and then in 1954 after the Pacific War, the next revised edition was published. The supplemental editions were edited and published during the revisions, in 1909, 1967 and 1976. Comparing these hymnals, we can see how the trend of thought and theology was reflecting the hymn in each period of time. We can also see volumes and the different types of hymns were also added. However, it took a long time to encompass the theology of liturgy, especially liturgical movement which began in western countries in late 19th century and ecumenical movement which advocates unification of churches. It was late 20th century when the content of liturgical movement and ecumenical movement was actually introduced in Japan.

## 2. Theological background

Since 1874, the theological background of Japanese Christian churches has inherited the background of each denomination of European churches for 130 years. Even though they were called Protestant churches, we have never experienced the Reformation, and so it was rather that of Puritan we were influenced. In addition, we tended to accept some Unitarian aspects as well. As a result, “Non-church movement” as unique Japanese phenomenon occurred. The impact of that phenomenon was rather strong and widespread. The feature of it can be greatly seen in how to select hymn at service. It was that of public missionary and individualistic trend. Or heavenly oriented hymn that are on the crest of the wave of Gold Rush was favorably sung.

These trends established types of religious piety rather than theology, and the people adapted themselves to hymn of those trends. We must admit that those trends existed in the last quarter of 19th century (the beginning era of hymnals in Japan ), in 20th century when common hymnal was published and exist even up until now.

As we experienced and feared World War I, the Great Depression and World War II, so called theology of crisis and dialectical theology emerged, by which Japan is also influenced. However, even under this circumstance, the content of hymn that is used for service at church did not change. Thus many contradictions are easily found. Because during the sermon, pastors do speak about new theological trends, while the content of hymn kept its old style such as individualistic piety, expansion of church, uplift of missionary spirit to achieve reformers.

Despite great efforts of missionaries, priests and pastors, the number of Christians in Japan is still small portion, which accounts for less than one percent of the total population. Having said this, the influence of what Christianity did to Japanese society, including education, culture and social welfare, was definitely huge. After Japan was defeated in the Pacific War in 1945, she created and kept “Peaceful Constitution” which declares to abandon any war affairs. Under this situation, Japan became economic power, but we are aware that religious and mental sphere is still rather poor.

On the other hand, South Korea became successful in terms of Christian mission. In the first quarter of 20th century, she was occupied by Japanese government for 36 years, and when she was released from Japan , the Korea peninsula was divided into North and South Korea . However the percentage of Christians in South Korea is now about 25 percent. Taiwan was also once occupied by Japan in early 20th century and Christians there are more active than Japan , but not as many as those in South Korea .

When three countries are compared, it is often said that Korean Church is “ Praising Church ”, Taiwanese Church is “ Praying Church ” and Japanese Church is “Theologically active Church”.

Since 1960, many books of theology of worship in the area of Japanese church and theology were published, and then the concern and research for liturgy arose. Some courses of worship began in theological schools in Japan . In 1955, I wrote master thesis on worship, graduated from graduate school and started to work as a pastor. However because of the theme of my master thesis, I was asked to lecture on theology of worship at a school of theology in 1962. I felt the responsibility to study further, and so I studied liturgics and hymnology at Union Theological Seminary in New York , N.Y. , U.S.A. , 1963~64. Returning to Japan , I taught liturgics at a few schools of theology, and hymnology at school of music, mainly in Tokyo . I was also involved in writing and editing a dictionary of Christian Worship and Liturgy, with colleagues, and could publish the dictionary in Japanese in 1977.

The fortunate incident was that in this period of time, as a result of Vatican Council II, Japanese Protestant churches started to have ecumenical dialogue, and collaborate with Japanese Catholic churches and Orthodox churches soon after the Council. On top of this, it is fortunate to know that Japanese churches began to exchange ideas, have conversation, and hold meetings with churches in South East Asia as well as those in South Korea and Taiwan .

In the field of theology of worship, or liturgics, it is not too much to say that we are on the verge of reconciling a sort of estrangement between mission and worship. Mission of church has been classified as external act, while worship of church as internal act. But by the recovery of worship as common act, in other words, worship in church as a faith community and the mission of God himself or 'Missio Dei', we succeeded to overcome that kind of estrangement or contradiction.

Therefore we had a task to speak a loud the necessity for developing hymn that are suitable for those theology of worship and liturgics. As a chairperson of Hymnal Committee of United Church of Christ in Japan, I was responsible for revising hymnal for more than thirty years. Thus, it is my great honor and pleasure to be able to publish "SAMBIKA 21" = 'THE HYMNAL 21' in 1997. I would also like to add that in order to accomplish all these above, the periodical called "REIHAI TO ONGAKU" = 'WORSHIP AND MUSIC' had played the great role to be a place for presentation for concrete research or ecumenical dialogue since 1955, (First 20 years are monthly, since 1974 quarterly). Amongst those who involved in this project, there were pastors, theologians, church musicians and believers from Orthodox Church, Catholic Church as well as Protestant Church. After my retirement as a pastor in the spring of 2001, with some colleagues, including Prof. Yasuhiko YOKOSAKA, from different denominations, we came to found Hymn Society in Japan and started our new footsteps together.