

RELIGIOUS TRUTH:
FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE
IN THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

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1. Introduction

In the secular world, the word “truth” is no longer used as a word spoken in general, although it exists in the dictionary. This does not necessarily mean however, that truth itself is estranged from human life. We trust something insofar as we conceive it is truth. No one wants to commit his or her life to what is regarded as false, and he or she cannot make the ultimate commitment to what is believed to be untruth. Therefore, we judge something according to our standards; by which we ascertain its worth; to accept it however, as truth, consciously or unconsciously.

It is almost unavoidable that a search for religious truth ends in involvement with religion. Cross-culturally speaking, we already have a cultural presupposition of religious truth in some degree before we look for it. In other words, the answer to religious truth can be received meaningfully only to the extent of one’s presuppositions about what religious truth is. There are various forms of religious truth that each culture assumes beforehand. A form of religious truth means a form in which a fulfillment of the quest for a religious truth would be expected, in its cultural context. For instance, Japanese may not accept what a missionary presents as truth unless it fits into what their culture assumes as the form of truth. Or Christians and Jews might not accept such a statement as “there is no solitary or absolute truth but various truths,” because it does not fit into their presupposition of the form of truth.

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Such an issue is decisively important when we consider cross-cultural ministry, for when we bring the truth of Christianity to another culture, we often bring the form of truth that is only meaningful for our cultural context. Moreover, how we understand a form of religious truth determines how we evangelize the targeted people in advance, which is critically important as well.

It is generally presumed that one main reason most Japanese do not accept Christianity is because they are polytheists. For most of us, a belief that God is only *one* is the religious truth that determines salvation when accepted. However, for Japanese, such belief that God is only one is not “truth,” at least not meaningful truth, no matter how veritable this belief may be. For Japanese, religious truth does not mean a true statement or belief. Nevertheless, in evangelism some missionaries and pastors make Japanese accept monotheism as a prerequisite for their salvation’s sake

We must help the targeted people to discover truth in such a way that it is meaningful for their cultural context. Therefore, we have to examine the cultural background of the targeted people regarding a concept of religious truth. In this research, I explore what religious truth means in the Japanese context and a few implications of this, related to evangelism, designed to incorporate Japanese religiosity with Christianity. My study is focused on religious truth.

2. Culture and Religious Truth

Humans seek for religious truth as an answer to their ultimate concern or ultimate reality. However, they search from a particular cultural context in which they experience predicaments that drive them to look for the truth. Otherwise, their quest cannot be existential. They ask for religious truth, using words that their cultural tradition gives them. Their quest is restricted by the culture and anticipates the form of the answer in advance in some degree. Because “different cultures ask different questions and view reality in different ways,”¹ truths are presented in different ways by respective cultures.

Hiebert, therefore, argues that the biblical revelation, the objective truth, must be understood in specific context, which is, according to him,

¹ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 47.

a biblical approach to knowledge.² Here we find that Hiebert assumes the ultimate religious truth to be identical with the so-called "biblical revelation" written by letters in the scripture. Yet, there are some cultural areas in which objective knowledge written in a book is of less value as a religious truth. To evangelize the targeted people effectively, a missionary must define in what way the word "truth" is used in the cultural context. Often the truth the missionary means is different from the truth the targeted people mean according to the religious traditions from which they obtain the concept of truth. Therefore, I would like to clarify the concepts of religious truth in several traditions.

3. Five Kinds of Religious Truth

With respect to concepts of religious truth, it seems that the analysis of Vroom is helpful for us to understand. He classifies concepts of religious truth into five categories: *doctrina* (public knowledge), *veritates* (comprehended knowledge), *vera religio* (practiced knowledge), *intellectus verus* (the moment of understanding) and *veritas* (the transcendent).³

3.1 Doctrine

First of all, we can define religious truth as *doctrine*. According to Vroom, "this concerns more or less public knowledge."⁴ Compared with a deeper religious knowledge, this is an *initial doctrine*, which enables one to attain a relatively simple religious understanding."⁵ There are several reasons why doctrines exist. First, they exist in order to answer such fundamental inquiries of human beings as to the nature of gods or God, the aims of the world, human destiny, the meaning of human life, the future of humanity and world, etc.⁶ Second, the doctrines differentiate one religious identity from another.⁷ Third, doctrines are intended to

² Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, pp. 47-50.

³ Hendrik M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspective*, trans. J. W. Rebel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 302.

⁴ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 318.

⁵ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 318.

⁶ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 352.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *A Complete History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper

protect the substance of the religion.⁸ Meanwhile, the first type of religious truth is initial doctrine is to guide beginners.

3.2 Appropriated Doctrine (*Veritates*)

According to Vroom, there is another type of religious truth related to doctrine known as appropriated doctrine; *veritates*. It is concerned with depth and a comprehensive understanding of the doctrines.

The background for our distinction between *doctrina* and *veritates* is that the *doctrina* is “valid” or “true” in a different manner that the *veritates* are. The truth of the *doctrina* is related to the shift in perspective which is the aim of the *initial doctrine*. The truth of the *veritates* is related to the new perspective which one has assimilated. This has consequences for the concept of truth.⁹

No matter how right a doctrine is, it would not be meaningful for people unless it is understood in the context of their background knowledge and experience. It seems to me that appropriated doctrine is internalized doctrine. An initial doctrine guides believers as external knowledge. In the process of our religious development, the initial doctrine shifts to an insight that unites with our existential situations in cognition. As a result, we get something that makes us view the world or ourselves in different dimensions. This insight does not transform the initial doctrine itself, but makes it meaningful for us. Appropriated doctrine is a realized truth in which we uncover the depth of a doctrine or a belief.

3.3 Lived Truth (*Religio Vera*)

In some religious traditions, truth is sought not so much within the doctrines but within the religious life itself, through practical commitment and obedience. “The ‘truth,’ to be perfectly consistent, is then a matter of being, and not truly a matter of knowing.”¹⁰ There are cultures where indirect communication predominantly takes place among people. In such cultures, acted or lived language is far more veritable than spoken and written language. Likewise, “in the articulation and

& Row, 1968), p. 8.

⁸ Tillich, *A Complete History of Christian Thought*, p. 9.

⁹ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 308.

¹⁰ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 311.

elaboration of doctrine, one cannot be as sure as in the experience of reality itself, which is what the basic convictions denote" in such cultures.¹¹

In contrast, other cultures, (some western), are generally skeptical about "experience" because it is difficult to measure objectively. "These basic experiences are partially determined by the *accumulated experience* of the tradition and its *being nurture* in the rituals and way of life which the tradition passes on."¹² Generally, such traditions in which *religio vera* represents the concept of truth as Judaism and Islam tend to make the people legalistic respecting "good deeds," the rituals and religious customs, focused exclusively on the forms of the experiences.

3.4 Experiencing Truth (*Intellectus Verus*)

As the fourth concept of truth Vroom points to, *experiencing* truth.

The *intellectual verus*, as we have seen, is conceived of as non-discursive experiencing of the Truth, that is, True Reality. This form of union occurs in some religious currents, but not in all. What is involved here is no longer showing what true reality is, making it visible and manifesting it, but rather immersion in it. Knowing the truth in this state coincides with being true.¹³

The pure reflection of experienced (transcendent) reality is then salvation and Truth. In the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Middle Ages, pure knowledge was not conceived as absorption in God. This experience can be articulated as, pure "awareness" of the transcendent.¹⁴

What is said is neither a doctrine nor a theological theory, but rather about a union with absolute truth. "The subject grasps the object, adapts it to itself, and, at the same time, adapts itself to the object."¹⁵

Enlightenment, the state of highest spiritual realization, also represents this type of tradition. Enlightenment does not simply mean to cognitively realize something. Rather it is a mysterious union with truth itself.¹⁶ In the Buddhist context, ultimate truth refers to the ultimate

¹¹ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 313.

¹² Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 313.

¹³ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 358.

¹⁴ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 316.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), vol. 1, p. 94.

¹⁶ Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teaching of*

nature of reality. This type knows that truth is a form of union in which the gap between subject and object is overcome.¹⁷ However, this type gives its adherents a dilemma or a tension particularly in Buddhist and mystical contexts. Historically and practically, those who sought this truth seldom experienced it as indicated in the history of both Buddhism and any mysticism. Buddhism assumes that only through constant practicing meditative techniques and training of the mind, can one expect to attain reaching the ultimate truth.¹⁸

3.5 The Transcendent as Truth

The last type of truth is: *only God himself is the truth*.¹⁹ This is typically implied in the Bible in the words of Jesus: “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18, RSV). Or related to the notion that God is the omniscient and ultimate reality. However, as Vroom points out, no one can circumvent quests for truth concerning humanity, the world, the meaning of life and so on, even if he or she knows *that only God is the truth*

4. The New Testament and Truth

In the New Testament, it seems that the usage of truth varies. According to the fourth Gospel, the truth is not a doctrine but a reality. Jesus himself is the truth: “I am the truth” (John 14:6). In other words, Jesus is the true reality, and in him, the ultimate reality is present, that is, God.²⁰

In the Johannine literature, the truth is always connected with “doing it.” Thus, the way by which one can reach the truth is “by doing it.” Knowing truth is identical with doing truth (1 John 1:6, 4). In this respect, there is no difference between John and Paul. The word Paul preferred to use when he talks about “knowledge” is *gnosis* which originally means cognitive, sexual, mystical union. One who is in union with Christ *lives*

Jesus, ed. Robert Kiely (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1996), p. 100.

¹⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 94.

¹⁸ Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart*, p. 46.

¹⁹ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 317.

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), p. 69.

in the new life (Eph 4:20-24; Col 3:9-11). Any one, therefore, who truly knows Jesus does the good. Nevertheless, doing the truth does not necessarily mean legalistic obedience to the religious commandments in action. Rather, "doing the truth means living out of the reality which is He who is the truth, making His being the being of ourselves and of our world."²¹ That is, "doing it" is attained "by being in truth" (John 15:1-10).

On the other hand, we find another usage of truth. In the New Testament, especially in the latter documents, the term "truth" is used in relationship to right teachings of the Christian life. Similarly, the content of the Christian proclamation in the New Testament, which is often expressed in preaching, is called truth as well.²² It is categorized as belief or doctrine in a broad sense. Since Christian proclamation contains certain fundamental beliefs regarding God, the works of Christ, the history of Israel, eschatological fulfillment, etc. (Acts 2:17-36; 3:18-26; 7:2-53; 10:36-43; 13:16-41), it had to be conveyed to the generation correctly. It reflects that in the latter part of the first century, the primitive church fought against heresies and schematics. We see the tendency of "truth" being used to describe right teachings in early New Testament Christianity and also in the apostolic fathers' documents in the post-New Testament era. Without such dogmatization in the early church, there may have been less possibility of Christianity surviving, though it had suppressive power over the various expressions of Christian teachings at the same time.

With careful study, it appears that truth as right teachings or doctrines in the early Catholicism of the New Testament functioned as a disclosure to render explicit essential truths the clarity of doctrine.²³ Tracy argues with respect to the usage of truth in early Catholicism.

Both these major genres, apocalyptic and the doctrines of early Catholicism, may best serve their roles in a contemporary interpretation of the actual diversity of the New Testament not as *the* truth but as the truth of important correctives.... Early Catholicism serves as the corrective of any temptation to shirk the ordinary, including the ordinary and necessary human need to find some clarity and explicitness for certain central shared beliefs as doctrines to allow for the human need to find order in thought and some structure in community.

²¹ Tillich, *The New Being*, p. 71.

²² Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 233.

²³ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 267.

Therefore, although truth in the latter New Testament usage in early Catholicism or Christianity apparently seems to be designated as doctrine, the total New Testament view of truth is that Jesus is the truth. Truth is the actualized new reality in the event of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. According to the New Testament view, truth is not based on an idea, a belief, a doctrine or a set of symbols, though they are used. Rather it is based on an event that has happened in time, space and a person who is called Jesus of Nazareth.²⁴ Tillich rightly points out that this element of event guarantees something which transcends and is far superior to all competing high religions whose claim of truth is without such a foundation.²⁵

It is hardly presumed that the New Testament authors conceived of their letters or their narratives as truth itself. It is rather more likely that they believed they were proclaiming, explicating and witnessing to the truth through their writings. From the New Testament view, truth is far superior to inspired scripture. No matter how correctly one explicates the truth in divine inspiration, truth itself stands out from so-called "biblical revelation" written in letters in the scripture. Needless to say that the scriptures are the expression of the apostolic witness and serve as normative, a set of inspirations, controls and corrective for Christian self-understanding and all later beliefs and doctrines. Nonetheless, more than biblical revelation and inspiration have been normatively embodied in the biblical revelation itself. The truth, the divine reality of the crucified and risen Christ, has been disclosed in time and space.

In conclusion, truth in the New Testament sense is distinctive compared to the five types of truth Vroom discusses. Yet on the other hand, it embraces all five types of truth within it. It, as the truth, is the ultimate criteria for truths found in various spiritual and religious traditions.

Although seemingly very close to the transcendent is the concept, that *only God himself is the truth*; in the New Testament sense, truth is distinctively unique in that it is a disclosed new reality in an event that has happened in time, space and a person. Truth as an event, a person born and revealed at a point of history was received in the church tradition and finally codified in the biblical cannon. And the reality of that event is continually experienced when one encounters the reality, the spirit of the person, who is called Jesus of Nazareth. Truth in the New

²⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), p. 46.

²⁵ Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, p. 47.

Testament meaning is inseparable from the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his advent that actually occurred in history.

Truth in the New Testament includes experiencing the truth. As a part of truth in the New Testament sense, experiencing truth holds a paradoxical character unlike Buddhism and non-Christian mysticism. In the New Testament sense, one may achieve union with the absolute truth that makes one a *true being* despite the obvious impossibility. Humans are all sinners; as such they are in the abyss of estrangement from the absolute truth. There is no direct way for them to unite themselves with the truth. This predicament will never change as long as they live. Nevertheless, because of Jesus Christ as the mediator we are justified and paradoxically become *true beings* in union with the absolute truth.

Lived truth is a concomitant element within the truth in the New Testament since knowing truth is identical with doing truth (1 John 1:6, 4). However unlike legalistic religions, one who is united with truth lives out the truth not by the law that condemns, but by the Spirit that liberates him or her to full freedom. In other words, being in truth we live out the truth by obeying it in freedom.

The truth manifested in the event of Christ can be formulated in a doctrine and be appreciated by a person in a way that full understanding of the doctrine brings about inner transformation. Thus the truth in the New Testament encompasses doctrine and appropriated doctrine.

5. Religious Truth in the Japanese Context

As we have seen so far, there are several types of perception of religious truth. Thus, it is crucially important for missionaries to recognize what types of truth the targeted people hold in their culture. No perception of religious truth in the targeted culture contradicts the ultimate truth, Christ. For Christ is the ultimate synthesis of those truths. Therefore, a missionary has to find a point where the targeted people's perception of religious truth pertains to the ultimate truth, and has to demonstrate how Christ fulfills their quest for the truth.²⁶

In this part, I explore types of religious truth that the Japanese hold. As we will see, there are two distinctive characteristics regarding the Japanese religiosity in relevance to religious truth.

²⁶ George G. Hunter, III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), p. 92.

5.1 Purity and Sincerity of Mind and Heart

As Aikawa points out, the essence of Shinto religiosity is defined as the eternal present in a visible form that is of formlessness.²⁷ Japanese intuit the eternal present in the ephemeral beauty of nature. This intuitive or aesthetic sensitivity, in itself, is a religious element and is related to the concept of religious truth.²⁸ Sensitivity to beauty is the pathway by which one reaches religious truth, that is, the eternal present.

As such, it describes a particular orientation of the Japanese to intuitive experience rather than to objective description or reason as the major mode of knowing or apprehending reality. *Mono-no-aware* is a way of perceiving reality and a mode of being in the world that emphasizes aesthetic intuition, experiential sensitivity to the invisible and unspoken, openness to depth and mystery, and appreciation of the pathos of passing beauty.²⁹

For some Japanese (in the sense and type of Shinto), a religious truth is not so much intellectual matter about a verity as a state of “heart.” In other words, a quest for truth is not so much a quest for knowing as a quest for being.

A pure heart and deep sincerity characterize what Shinto refers to as “truth” (*makoto*). “Truth,” here, is distinctly *not* some right or wrong view about the nature of things; it is a state of the mind/heart. Truth *is* as truth is lived in purity and emotional sensitivity.³⁰

Therefore, for Japanese, wherever a pure heart is present, “truth” is present as well. The truth might be present, for example, in a person who is uneducated and illiterate or in children who are caught up in picking flowers. In contrast, the truth might not be present in the heart of a clergy or an eminent scholar who is busy with fury.

A right state, such as a pure, unpolluted, and unclouded heart or mind is preserved by ritual purification so that one can be united with the Divine (*kami*). The pure heart is indispensable for unity with the divine because a polluted heart (*kegare*) estranges a person from unity.

²⁷ Takaaki Aikawa and Lynn Leavenworth, *The Mind of Japan: A Christian Perspective* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1967), p. 51.

²⁸ Robert S. Ellwood and Richard Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 86.

²⁹ Ellwood & Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion*, p. 87.

³⁰ Ellwood & Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion*, p. 105.

Therefore, the concept of sin for the Japanese can be understood in this context.

5.2 Primacy of Action

Another characteristic of religious truth in Japanese religiosity is the primacy of action. Generally speaking, the Japanese dislike belief-centered religion and are strongly reluctant to affirm commitment to specific doctrinal systems.³¹ According to a statistics, only 33% of Japanese affirmed religious belief, while 65% answered that they had no religious belief.³² On the other hand, astonishingly, the religious population statistic in Japan was 223 million members (1985) though the population of Japanese was 121 million.³³ It means that every person is supposed to belong to at least two religions. However, as I have cited, 65% of the population have no religious belief. So what should we understand about this fact? The answer is that for the Japanese, a religion is not identified with affirming a specific belief as much as participating in rituals in traditional festivals and performing religious actions demanded by certain situations as *Hatsumode* (Shinto ritual), *o-bon* (Buddhism ceremony) and so on.

People participate in religious activities because of such socio-cultural belongings. *Hatsumode* and *o-bon* are good examples of this: many Japanese people take part in the former because it is the thing to do at New Year and the latter because of household obligations. They can therefore pray to the deities and the ancestors because the situation and circumstance demand it, yet need not express beliefs in either. Participation thus cuts across religious boundaries.³⁴

As we see here, for Japanese people, a religion is that which is concerned with action, not belief. Such a characteristic reflects on the way by which they seek to reach religious truth. That is, in a sense, Japanese come to believe through doing; not come to doing through believing. In fact, this statement is somewhat exaggerated, and yet, it is valid to some degree. This aspect is well expressed in a Japanese student's words: "When I did it I began to realize its truth. If you do it

³¹ Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), p. 14.

³² Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 4.

³³ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 6.

³⁴ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 13.

you will understand too.”³⁵ For Japanese, a religious truth is that which is lived out, and knowing truth is bound with doing truth.

6. Implications

It seems to me that religious truth for Japanese people is categorized into either lived truth (*religio vera*) or experienced truth (*intellectus verus*). For both, as Vroom points out, what is at stake is not so much true knowledge, true insight or true doctrine, but being true. Therefore, “the concept of truth as we have described it in connection with *doctrine* is not applicable when one has the *religio vera* or the *intellectus verus* in mind.”³⁶

I think it is decisively important to evangelism in Japan to take this aspect into consideration, because unfortunately the approach we are using to reach the Japanese does not reflect how they perceive religious truth in their cultural context.

Pastors in Japan are called *sensei*, which means “a teacher” in English. Only Christian clergy are called *sensei* (teacher) among all the Japanese religions, which indicates how Christianity is regarded. In fact, Christianity impresses Japanese not so much as a religion but as a learning, which is one of the impediments that restrained church growth in Japan.³⁷

Western missionaries introduced the Protestant faith to Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912). In this era, the majority of the initial converts came from the *Samurai* class. They were the ruling people, educated at the schools built by the missionaries, and mostly, “the converts joined the church after a long period of study.”³⁸ Yamamori calls this intellectual way or pattern by which the converts came to the Christian faith the “school approach.”

The term is appropriate because the largest number of converts came from the schools where students were either formally instructed in the Bible or enrolled in extracurricular Bible classes for a period of time and

³⁵ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 18.

³⁶ Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 358.

³⁷ Tetsuo Yamamori, *Church Growth in Japan: A Study in the Development of Eight Denominations 1859-1939* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974), p. 127.

³⁸ Yamamori, *Church Growth in Japan*, p. 127.

then received baptism. The number would swell, if the post-graduate converts were counted.³⁹

It seems that the scholastic approach determined the character of the church in Japan and still prevails today. As a result, we see three negative effects in the church in Japan in general. First, the gospel is conveyed in intellectual way.⁴⁰ Second, the converts join the church one by one rather than by group.⁴¹ Third, Christianity is still regarded as a foreign religion by non-believers, thus, still a stranger or outsider in the Japanese society.⁴²

In contrast to the mainline Protestant church, the Pentecostal church is influenced less by the scholastic approach. However, even in the Pentecostal circle in Japan, since faith is equated with the acceptance of a specific belief, their approach is highly belief-oriented, and they are apt to impose intellectual acceptance of the gospel on people before they appreciate the spiritual life of Christianity itself. Thus, for the Pentecostal church, one's affirmation of a belief or doctrine is not so much the terminal as a starting point of the religious life. Recognizing these problems, I would like to suggest some implications that would be conducive to evangelism in Japan.

6.1 Spirit-centric Approach (Experiential Approach)

Traditionally the Protestant church emphasizes the doctrine of Justification, the forgiveness of sin. Hence, reflecting the dogmatic emphasis, a Japanese Protestant preacher in an evangelist meeting (where the church invites non-believers) is apt to challenge the targeted people to believe in this forensic doctrine. This substitute notion of divine punishment is presented as the indispensable condition to be saved. Such an approach can be classified as a Christ-centric, objective, forensic or cognitive approach, which is hardly seen as a religious truth by Japanese.

In the Japanese context, truth is experiential and personal. Truth as philosophical or conceptual, separated from feeling, is almost meaningless to the Japanese. Thus they are looking for communities in which spiritual experiences are tangible and real. We have to start with

³⁹ Yamamori, *Church Growth in Japan*, pp. 57-58.

⁴⁰ Robert Lee, *Stranger in the Land: A Study of the Church in Japan* (London: Lutter Worth, 1967), p. 161.

⁴¹ Yamamori, *Church Growth in Japan*, p. 126.

⁴² Lee, *Stranger in the Land*, pp. 156-71.

personal experience. Richardson well sums up such an experiential approach in one sentence: "Experience comes before explanation."⁴³

George Hunter's research on Celtic Christianity is suggestive of the experiential approach we are discussing. In his recent book, Hunter describes Celtic Christianity in comparison to Roman Christianity. He argues that, whereas Roman Christianity emphasized the transcendence of God, seeming to have experienced him as distant, Celtic Christianity emphasized the immanence of God. Celtic Christians experienced the triune God as dweller in their hearts and companion in daily life, while Roman Christians exclusively experienced the divine presence in the sacraments, if at all.⁴⁴ Hunter especially highlights the Christianized pantheism of Celtic Christianity that viewed creations as sacramental. Just as Japanese people intuitively see the eternal present in the ephemeral beauty of nature, Celtic Christians appreciated divine presence in nature in which they lived.

The disposition of the Celtic Christians, Hunter reports, was the basis of the imaginative communication of Christianity's message that featured Celtic Christianity. He analyzes that Celtic Christians were predominantly right-brained, that they did well intuiting, feeling, imagining and in experiential activities.⁴⁵ In contrast to Celtic Christianity, we could say that Roman Christianity and even Protestant Christianity tend to rely upon logical thinking in words, propositions, concepts and theological abstractions. So while Roman Christianity spoke in concepts, Celtic Christians spoke from their imaginations to the imaginations of their hearers through poetry and storytelling.⁴⁶ Such an approach is simplified by Rich Richardson: "Image comes before word."⁴⁷ The Celtic approach employed analogical imagination that witnessed to God's immanence in both the beauty of nature and to the intuitive or aesthetic sensitivity of the hearts of the Celtic barbarians.

Based on what I have discussed above, I suggest the Spirit-centric, subjective, sensuous or experiential approach, because the foremost religious concern of the Japanese is of brightness and purity of heart and an open-minded awareness of reality. Making a comparison with a

⁴³ Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience in the Good News* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), p. 51.

⁴⁴ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁷ Richardson, *Evangelism outside the Box*, p. 52.

Christ-centric approach, I would like to call it the Spirit-centric approach or the experiential approach.

The Pauline term, *a new being in Christ* (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), would help make it possible for the Japanese to understand Christian salvation as transformation by the Spirit. The spiritual power in Christ restores cleanliness and purity of being or heart, and makes it possible to *be* in truth, a state of being; not to *know* truth. "Truth is as truth is lived in purity and emotional sensitivity."⁴⁸ The possibility to achieve such a state would seem to be the good news, a fulfillment of their religious desire.

The Spirit-centric approach calls for analogical imaginations not in teaching the content of the faith but in intuiting the meaning of the faith. For Japanese, religious truth concerns a state of mind/heart, a true being, which is achieved by divine presence in mind/heart. Yet only by analogical imaginations can we talk about the divine presence or immanence in our mind/heart. Thus the Spirit-centric approach, not by concepts but by imaginations, seeks to help intuit and sense a new state or reality in our hearts that the Spirit creates.

And it seeks genuine spiritual experiences which Japanese long for more than explanations of the word of God as a universal value.⁴⁹ It should be noted, however, that genuine spiritual experiences do not necessarily mean supernatural experiences in which one's individualistic self-interests come true. Rather, they have a great deal to do with a sense of belonging and warm fellowship in love.⁵⁰ Richardson's strategic principle for evangelism in a post-modern world is as applicable to Japanese as to American society in transition toward the postmodern era. He argues, "People are looking first for a community to belong to rather than a message to believe in."⁵¹ As he sums it up, belonging comes before believing.⁵²

Hunter highlights in this respect the contrast between the Roman model for reaching people and the Celtic model that is instructive of the

⁴⁸ Ellwood & Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ Richardson, *Evangelism outside the Box*, p. 59.

⁵⁰ J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), p. 243, once a missionary to Japan, points out that Japanese generally come to the church with group-oriented motives.

⁵¹ Richardson, *Evangelism outside the Box*, p. 48.

⁵² Richardson, *Evangelism outside the Box*, p. 52.

Spirit-centric approach I am suggesting here. The Roman model begins with presenting the Christian message, thereby inviting people to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians. If they decide positively, then they are welcome into the church and its fellowship. That is the way which most of us assume seems logical to evangelism.⁵³

Contrary to the Roman model, the Celtic model engages people in the reverse. It first establishes community, thereby bringing them into the fellowship of the community of faith. Within fellowship, the people engage in conversation, ministry, prayer and worship. In time, when they discover that they now believe in Christ, it invites them to commit.⁵⁴

In order to believe later, Japanese first need to be involved in an accepting fellowship in which spiritual experiences are genuine, real and tangible. The fellowship should evidence among members a new reality of life and spirituality that will lead the Japanese into experiencing the Spirit of Christ. If they experience, then they will accept the Christian message as credible. Therefore, conversion in the Spirit-centric approach has to do with a process of becoming aware of a new reality in Christian fellowship.

Ironically the Celtic model is quite popular and common in growing new religions in Japan although uncommon in Christianity. When engaging in evangelism they first invite people to come to their fellowship where guests are befriended, loved and accepted before they will check out beliefs and doctrines. Then, while building friendship with the guests, members start sharing spiritual experiences they have had.

As I refer to spiritual experiences, I do not just mean supernatural miracles. Rather it is spiritual realizations within our selves since the Japanese perceive being true as religious truth. Such spiritual realizations must be communal and transformational. The spiritual realizations may include deeper sensitivity to self and others, a feeling of equanimity toward all, self acceptance, a subtle sense of the holy, freeness from material attachment, a deep awareness of human predicament and dignity, genuine compassion and love and so on. In other words, it is these experiences that help overcome the negative forces, impulses and tendencies which lie within us. I believe only Christian fellowship in which the Spirit is active can cultivate these spiritual experiences within the Japanese as they participate.

⁵³ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 53.

⁵⁴ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 53.

In addition, it might be useful to develop Christianized rituals to assist Japanese people in creating an atmosphere that is helpful for the spiritual state of mind longing for experiencing divine presence.

Still another way to suggest poetic reality in Shinto is to consider the centrality of ritual action and the importance of direct experience of the presence of kami (deity) in and through ritual. Shinto ritual is not only a process of purification (internal and external) but also a process of waiting for and waiting on the presence of kami in the tranquil stillness of nature; it demands an experiential sensitivity to see, hear, or feel the coming and going of kami. As one Shinto priest told me [Pilgrim], Shinto ritual (especially individual worship) is primarily a matter of waiting in the right state of mind for the coming of kami and then being a proper host for the sacred guest.⁵⁵

6.2 Action and Practice First

I think it is important to establish a proper sequence for Japanese evangelism. It can be said, "firstly, action and practice then eventually, belief." Primacy of action in the Japanese context means that they search for truth that works in life or that makes a difference in life. What Richardson points out about a postmodern world is cogently valid for Japanese too: "Today people often come to Jesus by first trying to live by his wisdom and follow his lifestyle."⁵⁶

In this regard, based on the primacy of action, I would like to suggest a role or a function of the Bible in the context of the Japanese religiosity. I think it is more appropriate for the Japanese to define the Bible as the canon designed for teaching what is to be practiced than that designed for teaching what to be accepted as beliefs. In other words, it must be emphasized for the Japanese that the Bible is read for the sake of being true by doing. It seems to me that this suggestion coincides with virtual components of the Bible.

In general, the Japanese begin with form in act, then reach the meaning, with respect to religious life. Thus, as an introduction to Christian life, it is necessary to develop such forms of religious practices or rituals for individuals as is Islamic prayer practiced with bowing down every day or Buddhist prayer practiced with invocation (*nen-butsu*) before the altar every morning.

⁵⁵ Ellwood & Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion*, p. 106.

⁵⁶ Richardson, *Evangelism outside the Box*, p. 49.

Such action and practice could be addressed to the Japanese in a way that is congruent with their situations and needs because they are highly need and situation-oriented people. There is an antecedent ritual in the history of Christianity applicable to the Japanese context: the Celtic contemplative prayer.

First of all, Celtic contemplative prayers addressed each of the many experiences that filled a day, and even included the “excluded middle.” They gave people brief, daily rituals, which they learned by heart in repetition. They learned how to pray for sowing seed and for harvesting crops; for herding cows and milking cows; for a new baby or a new baby chick; for getting up in the morning, dressing, and starting the morning fire; for bathing and washing clothes. Such repetitious prayers were prayed while weaving, hunting, fishing, cooking and traveling, for healing, blessing and coping with specific threats.⁵⁷

I lie down this night with God, and God will lie down with me;
 I lie down this night with Christ, and Christ will lie down with me;
 I lie down this night with the Spirit, and the Spirit will lie down with me.⁵⁸

Second, they engaged people’s imaginations through visual and spatial imagery. A Celtic prayer consisted of simple and short sentences in poetic form that people easily learned by heart. Hunter offers an example of them.

The Three Who are over me,
 The Three Who are below me,
 The Three Who are above me here,
 The Three Who are above me yonder,
 The Three Who are in the earth,
 The Three Who are in the air,
 The Three Who are in the heavens,
 The Three Who are in the great pouring sea.⁵⁹

It seems to me that such ritual in prayer is a good point at which a missionary can start to engage in directing the hearts of the Japanese toward God, moment-by-moment, setting by setting. The following saying can sum it up: “Action comes before appreciating.”

⁵⁷ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 82.

⁵⁹ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 34.

Here again I should emphasize the importance of Christian fellowship which Japanese can join and be encouraged to attempt to live out a new life. In the context of fellowship with Christians, they will see a living example of the new life and how it works. Observing and participating in the Christian fellowship, they may engage in conversations with people who live with a contrasting view of reality, and gradually adopt and internalize the new way of living through re-socialization into a community sharing that new reality of life.⁶⁰ In that process, they may acquire a new language, conversational themes (Eph 5:3-4), symbols, daily rituals (prayers and sacraments) and music (worship) that empowers them to accord with the culture of the kingdom of God.

6.3 Truth and Verification

To conclude, I would like to make a brief comment on the verification of religious truth. Every truth strives for verification. However, the type of truth that the Japanese seek as being true and pure in heart is subjective, and seems to be aloof from the verification itself as well. Indeed, the experimental and critical method of verification is not valid for this type of truth. Yet, verification of this truth could take place within the life-process itself. "The life-process itself makes the test."⁶¹ As Tillich points out, "the verifying experiences of a nonexperimental character are truer to life, though less exact and definite."⁶² We can find it in the Pauline term as "a demonstration of the Spirit and of power."⁶³

7. Conclusion

Since Jesus himself is the ultimate truth as the ultimate reality, he is the ultimate answer to all spiritual quests for truth in all cultures and religions. As such truth, he is the final revelation of God. Thus, it means that the truth manifested in Jesus must be made known to the targeted people in a way that coincides with their quests for truth. I believe that one reason why Christianity is not pervasive in Japanese society is not

⁶⁰ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 100.

⁶¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 103.

⁶² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 102.

⁶³ 1 Cor 2:4 (NRSV)

because the Japanese are not thirsty for truth, but rather because we are not effectively communicating the truth to them in an appropriate way. Below is a list of suggested principles for reaching the Japanese people that we have explored.

1. Experience comes before explanation.
2. Image comes before word.
3. Belonging comes before believing.
4. Action comes before appreciating.

Therefore, we should reconsider and understand the way in which Japanese quest for religious truth as well as the way by which the church conveys the truth to them. This effort will continue to be sought until the end of time.