

GORDON CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CHRISTIANITY IN THE AMERICAN JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMPS

SUBMITTED TO DR. GORDON ISAAC
IN PARTIAL COMPLETION OF CH 502 THE CHURCH SINCE THE REFORMATION

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MARCH 31, 2021

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Introduction: War & Incarceration

At 7:55 AM on 7 December 1941, the stillness of the morning was overhauled into terror as metal shrapnel brought destruction upon Hawaii. Japanese bombers attacked the American naval base Pearl Harbor. The United States of America could no longer be a bystander in World War II. America had a new enemy, the Japanese. Lester Suzuki, a prominent Japanese American minister, recalls, “Anti-Japanese stereotypes had been built up as a heritage in the white American public, so much so that there was a traditional view of the Japanese as inscrutable, treacherous, and disloyal, and that view quickly emerged when the Pearl Harbor attack took place.”¹ Negative prejudice shaped the experience of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans in the United States. Their bodies marked them as different and now as enemies. Upon hearing the news about Pearl Harbor, Monica Sone, a Japanese American, shares, “I knew instinctively that the fact that I was an American by birthright was not going to help me escape the consequences of this unhappy way.”² These narratives of Anti-Japanese stereotypes propelled the Japanese community towards logical action. They moved to separate themselves from what distinguished them as Japanese. “Nikkei [people of Japanese descent] rushed to burn, bury, or otherwise destroy items from Japan: Buddhist shrines, texts, statues, language textbooks, Japanese flags, kimonos, photographs, and anything else with Japanese writing.”³ But they could not escape their Japanese bodies.

Hatred and fear of Japanese people continued to increase in America. In the eyes of American society, everyone who looked like the enemy was the enemy. On 19 February 1942,

¹ Lester Suzuki, *Ministry in the Assembly and Relocation Centers of World War II*, (Berkeley, Yardbird Publishing Co, 1979), 23.

² Anne Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese American Incarceration During World War II*, (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 13.

³ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 16.

the White House took decisive action. On the Oval Office desk, President Franklin D. Roosevelt placed his signature on Executive Order 9066. This order issued:

“In most critical areas you may consider it necessary to bring about an almost immediate evacuation of Japanese aliens and Japanese-American citizens.” Furthermore, German and Italian aliens as a group were not to be affected for the present. McCloy directed DeWitt to exclude “persons” who were German aliens “where in your judgment is essential.” Italian aliens and persons of Italian lineage, said Stimson in a February 20 letter to DeWitt, should be left undisturbed unless they were “undesirable” or “a definite danger” because such persons are potentially less dangerous than other enemy nationalities, because of the size of the group.⁴

General John L. DeWitt, a vocal activist for incarcerating those of Japanese descent on the west coast, now had the authority to execute what he had been longing for.⁵

With the power of the federal government and the United States Army behind him, General DeWitt and other military officials began to incarcerate everyone they considered a threat. “Lieutenant General John DeWitt made immediate plans to evict men, women, and children - anyone with one-sixteenth or greater Japanese ancestry - from the West Coast and Alaska.”⁶ The verdict was made. With no trial, attorney, or jury, people of Japanese descent who lived on the West Coast were subject to incarceration. Providing one of the only primary Japanese Christian historical accounts during the internment, Suzuki shares, “The total Japanese population in the 48 states of the United States was 126,947 in 1940. The Western Defense Command had 117,364 or 92.5% of all Japanese in the continental United States.”⁷ Over ninety percent of Japanese people in America, aliens and citizens alike, were taken from their homes

⁴ Jacobus Ten Brock, Edward N. Barnhart, Floyd M Matson, Prejudice, *War and the Constitution*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970), 112.

⁵ Notice how the Italians and Germans were seen differently than the Japanese. Although all three countries were considered as enemies, people of Japanese descent were treated differently. The two atomic bombs dropped by the United States of America during World War II were dropped in Japan, not Germany and Italy. One of the writer’s grandmothers, Lily Ono, a Japanese American who was incarcerated in the Japanese Internment Camps, always questioned why the Japanese were treated differently. Although there may be many factors to consider for why this may be, one aspect could have been racial categorization. In 1922 the Supreme Court ruled the Japanese could not legally be white. See Robin Diangelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2018), 17. Also see Suzuki, *Ministry in the Assembly*, 321.

⁶ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 17.

⁷ Suzuki, *Ministry in the Assembly*, 29.

and placed under military watch. Moving over a hundred thousand people from freedom to custody was no small task. Those incarcerated were first gathered into fifteen temporary holding facilities called *assembly centers*. Then, in mass, they were transported to ten more permanent *relocation centers*. These relocation centers were located in the “western desert or Arkansas’s poverty ridden deltas.”⁸

With only a few days to prepare to move into an incarcerated life, Japanese people scrambled to get their households in order. Evacuees were allowed to take very few personal items into the internment camps. “For each member of the family, ‘bedding and linens (no mattresses)... toilet articles... extra clothing... sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls and cups... essential personal effects’ were to be taken. Everything else had to be left behind.”⁹ Leaving behind property, belongings, and pets, their old life was ripped away from them. Some economists estimate people of Japanese descent unjustly lost \$350,000,000 due to the evacuation.¹⁰ And, now the interned Japanese began their journey into the desert, where their new life in the relocation centers resided.

The incarceration provoked a chaotic and traumatizing reality for the Nikkei. With an unclear future, unjust societal discrimination, and a new reality before them, the Japanese people needed ways to cope with their experiences. Many turned to religion for answers and direction. The three dominant religious expressions found within the camps were Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism.¹¹ This paper examines the Protestant Christian ministry and the authenticity of the Japanese peoples’ Christian faith within the incarceration camps.

⁸ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 18.

⁹ Suzuki, *Ministry in the Assembly*, 31.

¹⁰ Brock, *War and the Constitution*, 127.

¹¹ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 101.

Protestant Christian Ministry Within the Internment Camps

Similar to building an airplane while flying in the air, masses of Japanese people moved into bare areas of the desert and began to build their new societies within the ten relocation centers. Knowing their role was essential, Japanese Protestant Church leaders rushed to organize church ministries within the camps. Blankenship reports, “Six hundred Nikkei attended the Protestant service on 10 May, less than two weeks after [Camp Harmony] opened.”¹² People were flocking to the church in great volume. With a monumental task before them, church leaders began to discern how to move forward in organizing the camps churches and their ministries.

There are multiple questions to examine while evaluating the Protestant Church’s ministry in the relocation centers. How much religious freedom did the Japanese religious leaders have while incarcerated? If multiple denominations were represented within a camp, did the Protestant church work and worship together? If so, did they work well together? How did the Church have to adapt to the cultural divide between first-generation Japanese immigrants (Issei) and those of Japanese descent who were born in America (Nisei)? Each of these questions will be examined throughout this section.

Having been stripped from their homes and uprooted from their lives, the United States government attempted to maintain religious liberty within the relocation centers. Knowing religion has the power to mobilize and radicalize people, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) placed strict guardrails around “State Shinto or emperor worship.”¹³ Yet, the country of Japan made a distinction between Shinto and other practiced religions. In other words, Buddhism and Christianity were categorized as religions, whereas Shinto was not. Therefore, “the WRA could

¹² Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 52.

¹³ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 99.

declare absolute religious liberty by categorizing Shinto as something other than religion. In any case, camp directors always had ultimate veto power.”¹⁴ This is to say, the incarcerated Japanese people could practice their religious leanings as they pleased, but their freedom could be taken from them at any time. For the majority of ministry operations, the incarcerated were able to execute freely. Yet, there were incidents where the government moved to regulate specific details of *how* a ministry functioned.

In Camp Harmony, “McGovern [the center manager] allowed pastors to speak to groups in Japanese if congregants could not understand English, but religious groups could not print bulletins or other material in Japanese initially.”¹⁵ This particular prohibition highlights the fear towards unassimilated immigrants. In the eyes of the powerful, *different* equated to *dangerous*. English could be printed, but Japanese was prohibited. To move a “Jap” from dangerous enemy to loyal ally required a Nikkei to strip their Japanese culture and embrace the “American” way of life.¹⁶

Attempting to organize the internment camps with simple operations, the War Relocation Administration “wanted one Buddhist, one Protestant, and one Catholic church at each camp.”¹⁷ Yet, this desire came with many complications, particularly for the Protestant faith. Due to the many Protestant denominations represented within the camps, the challenge of learning to work and worship together was set before them. In an attempt toward unity and centralizing resources, many Japanese Protestant Christian leaders attempted to build the camp churches with

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 51.

¹⁶ This concept, fear against non-eurocentric cultures, is also seen outside of the camps in the larger American culture. During the war, there was a movement to move away from anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism. In 1938-39, the U.S. Office of Education made a large push to embrace religious tolerance and diversity, but only for Judeo-Christian religions. Buddhism was excluded from this list. This is not to say Christianity and Judaism are European religions, it is simply to say these religions were associated with European cultures. See Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 155.

¹⁷ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 101.

an *ecumenical* conviction. Attempting to place their divides aside, the protestant denominations attempted to function as one Church body. It is vitally important to note that Japanese Christian ministers were the ones who predominantly held leadership positions within the emerging internment churches. The times demanded immediate strategizing and execution, “by the time white church volunteers arrived months later, Nikkei pastors had already established their basic approach to ecumenism and designed the churches’ leadership structures.”¹⁸

While discussing the ecumenical approach to protestant ministry, two Japanese Church leaders are notable for mention, Andrew Kurodas and Tom Fukuyama. Although both of these pastors advocated for an ecumenical approach for protestant worship, their visions and goals were different. Kurodas saw ecumenism as the ideal, where Fukuyama saw it as a necessity for the situation at hand. Kurodas encouraged his colleagues to study the unifying beliefs, practices, and liturgies of the Protestant tradition. “Kuroda wanted congregants to know that their church’s ecumenical design was not a decision made out of convenience but rather an intentional opportunity to experiment with a sacred, true manifestation of Christianity.”¹⁹ For the youthful Baptist pastor, Fukuyama could engage in many different spaces. Although Fukuyama was Baptist, he had no problem preaching in a Methodist pulpit. His ecumenical leadership was simply based upon the unprecedented situation and not a conviction driven by an ideal. Fukuyama’s flexibility and adaptability represents many Japanese Protestant ministers.²⁰

As the ecumenical approach to church ministry unfolded, the services ended up resembling those of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists traditions. This excluded the Anglicans, mostly due to their theological understanding of the Eucharist, consubstantiation. This Anglican belief states the *Real Presence of Christ* is united with the element of bread and

¹⁸ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 105.

¹⁹ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 111.

²⁰ *Idib.*

wine. This unique theological conviction is paired with a unique requirement. Only an Anglican priest can initiate this transformation. Therefore, “Episcopal incarceratedees required the presence of their own clergy and met separately for communion in every camp.”²¹

In a brief historical overview of the ministry within the camps, Suzuki recalls:

Every center from Poston on the Western edge of Arizona, and Manzanar and Tule Lake in California to Rohwer and Jerome Centers in Arkansas, and Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, to Rohwer and Jerome Centers in Arkansas, and Minidoka, Idaho, Topaz, Utah, Heart Mountain, Wyoming, Amache, Colorado, and Gila, Arizona, carried on an effective camp ministry for all ages, for children for young people, young adults, for the Japanese Issei congregations. The nature and contents differed a little for the various camps but they were all geared to the age groups.²²

Suzuki, as a primary witness to the ministry in the camps, emphasized how ministry needed to be differentiated based upon age groups, in every camp. This strategic decision was universal.

Although this seems like standard church praxis, there was a complication happening between these age groups, mainly between the Issei (first generation Japanese Immigrants) population and the Niseis (those of Japanese descent born in the States) population. The Issei were formed in an immersion of Japanese culture, the Nisei were not. The Niseis grew up in American culture, driven by American values, language, and traditions. Although the Issei and Niseis share similar bodily particularities, their formation resulted in a cultural divide between the two generations. This created a grave challenge to the ecumenical spirit.

Within the Protestant Nikkei Christian community, the cultural difference between these generations may be described as dichotomous. Language barriers, different preferences of worship styles, theological variance, and different cultural likings created a chasm between the generations. This led to “some Nisei complaining that Issei planned too many ‘Japanese programs,’ which should be discouraged in order to ‘promote more distinctly *American*

²¹ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 116.

²² Sumio Koga, *A Centennial Legacy: History of the Japanese Christian Missions in North America* (Chicago, Nobart Inc, 1977), 41.

programs.”²³ The language of this quote leads to an important discussion. While examining Christianity in the American Japanese Internment Camps, one must also explore the connection of the Protestant Christian religion and Americanization.

Americanization: Christianity vs. Buddhism

As the incarcerated were gathered into camps, the War Relocation Administration came with an agenda for the Japanese, *Americanization*. Observably, the WRA had three goals. The first goal was the physical upkeep of the incarcerated. The second was to relocate the incarcerated into “normal” communities. And, the third was to address the anti-Japanese elements in the national press. Dr. Gary Okihiro comments, “All three objectives emphasized the importance of the WRA ‘Americanization’ program - to demonstrate the loyalty of the Japanese in acquiescing to camp confinement, to enable assimilation into American life, and to refute the accusations of Japanese disloyalty by a hostile press.”²⁴ The bodies of the people of Japanese descent, citizens and aliens alike, looked like the enemy. It was fear of disloyalty that led the Nikkei into forced relocation. Americans demanded those who looked like the enemy to *prove* their loyalty. This demand came at a high expense, for some it cost them their lives. While imprisoned, the Nikkie had the opportunity to enlist in the United States military to serve in the war. During memorial services of the Japanese American soldiers, “Speakers praised recruits for proving the loyalty of Nikkei and helping save America from its enemies.”²⁵ This background is crucial to understanding the context of the religious scene within the internment camps, because this context displays the sociological reality in which these Japanese people are functioning in.

²³ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 119. (emphasis added)

²⁴ Gary Okihiro, *Religion and Resistance in America's Concentration Camps*, 222.

²⁵ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 152.

One must prove their loyalty. This occurs by *becoming* American, stripping away what is Japanese and taking on the American way of life.

In the Heart Mount incarceration center, a relocation center in Wyoming, the incarcerated Japanese people had “requested a day off for the celebration of Buddha’s birth, pointing out its similarity to Christmas. Robertson [the camp director] disapproved since the Buddhist lived in a ‘Christian nation.’”²⁶ If the United States of America is a “Christian nation,” then becoming a Christian may be part of assimilating into American culture. Just because the Constitution provides “religious freedom” , doesn’t mean society won’t give privilege to those who participate in what the dominant society dictates as the preferred religion. Therefore, there would have been societal benefits for Japanese people to convert from Buddhism to Christianity. Okihiro notes being labeled as either a Buddhist or a Christian came with consequences. A Christian label came with positive consequences and provided a sense of security. The Buddhist label came with negative consequences and made them vulnerable.²⁷ Tetsuden Kashima writes, “Many Nisei Buddhist apparently were afraid to attend the religious institution of their parents: thousands listed ‘no preference’ in their religion, and many even became Christians.”²⁸ What is being identified is the social factor which promoted conversion to Christianity. If a Japanese person converted to Christianity, they would be taking one more step toward Americanization. One could even argue, white supremacy and fear drove some to convert to or take on the label of Christian. “Nominal Christians were ridiculed as ‘Christians of convenience’ by both Buddhists and Christians alike.”²⁹ If convenience is what drove some to convert, there may have been social benefits to conversion.

²⁶ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 101.

²⁷ Gary Okihiro, *Religion and Resistance in America’s Concentration Camps*, 223.

²⁸ Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America : The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution*. Contributions in Sociology, No. 26. (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1977), 54.

²⁹ Gary Okihiro, *Religion and Resistance in America’s Concentration Camps*, 223.

Every Nikkei generation experienced forceful pressure to embrace *American* Christianity. Yet, during the formative years of development, children were engulfed in this cultural force. At the Minidoka relocation center in south central Idaho, white religious leaders and WRA officials encouraged camp churches to sponsor “vacation schools” or “religious summer school.” At the end of the two-week vacation school, “Protestant and Catholic graduates, pledged their allegiance to the United States, a Christian flag, and the Bible at a graduation ceremony.”³⁰ The air these young Nisei breathed was saturated with messages about America being a Christian nation, leading to the belief that being a Christian is being American. Knowing the essence of Christianity is not allegiance to the United States of America, but to a middle-eastern God-man, poses an interesting question. Was the faith of these Japanese American Christians authentic?

Lived Theology: An Authentic Faith

It may *not* be possible to truly determine if another person’s faith is authentic or not. It also may not be one’s duty to determine the purity of authenticity in the midst of such complex realities. What remains are the true stories and testimonies of Japanese Christians.

What the Japanese people desperately needed was redemption. In the face of devastating injustice, harsh suffering, and profound loss, the Christian faith provided a theological framework to process their experience. Dr. Anne Blankship defines lived theology as, “adopting biblical, theological, and historical models to fit a lived reality.”³¹ In a world that despised, feared, and treated people of Japanese descent as sub-human, there was a gospel message for the Nikkei about a God who grafts outsiders into God’s chosen people. Suzuki proclaims:

³⁰ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 116.

³¹ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 159.

The writer and many other ethnic ministers have been captivated by the truth, or perhaps insight, that the Japanese people are akin to the patriarch Abraham and his people, when he went out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. Even as the Apostle Paul expounds in some of his epistles, those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ become inheritors of a New Israel, a new covenant. In the same way many Japanese people became part of the New Israel under a new covenant.³²

This message of the God of Abraham creating a new covenant with all people of every nation through Jesus Christ shaped the imaginations and the affections of the Japanese Christians. It formed them into a people of *profound fellowship* and *resilient strength*.

The injustice they experienced could have manifested into isolating bitterness and destruction. Yet, Japanese American Pastor Paul Nagano describes, “There is a true *koinonia* (deep fellowship of love) in suffering together. In this sense, the camp life was an unforgettable experience of joy and fellowship.”³³ This suffering was shared and redeemed amongst each other. It brought them toward one another and to their God who was willing to bear suffering for the redemption of the world. Their wounding could have led them down a path of bitter isolation, which many incarcerated Japanese experienced. But the Christian faith brought redemption, creating profound joy and belonging among the Japanese Christian community.

Yoshisada Kayai testifies, “The power to... overcome sufferings and hardships... becoming confined physically in the barbed wires [gave him] spiritual freedom... I thought that I really experienced the freedom which was given to me by God.”³⁴ While experiencing physical imprisonment, Kayai gained spiritual freedom. Although he was physically bound to his current experience, he knew his unjust experience was not the end. With the resolve for Christ’s faithful redemption, “Numerous incarcerated expressed similar feelings that they were no longer ‘resentful for being pushed into camp, not bitter, nor discouraged, but happy, strengthened...

³² Suzuki, *Ministry in the Assembly*, 40.

³³ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 161.

³⁴ Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice and the Japanese*, 163.

through Christ.”³⁵ The Gospel of Jesus Christ provided the resilient strength to see the redemptive value in these horrid experiences.

Even if the Gospel message came to Japanese Americans packaged in American nationalism, the Nikkei unwrapped the Gospel message from American nationalism and made it their own. “The ministry in the relocation centers was pregnant with the seed of the theology of pluralism.” Suzuki declares, “The Japanese people had a self-consciousness as an ethnic people... They were trying to assert their dignity and humanity in the intrinsic worth of their own traditions and cultural inheritance.”³⁶ In this quote, Suzuki explains the Japanese people merged the Gospel message with their ethnic identity. American Nationalism was not the message that had won their hearts. Their hearts were won over by the message of Jesus Christ coming to graft the Japanese Gentiles into the family of God.

Michiko Ino Yee was incarcerated at Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona, from second grade through fourth grade. Through the ministry of Japanese Christians in the camp, the seeds of the message of Jesus Christ were sown in her elementary days and took root in high school. Decades later, she testifies to a group of university students:

In the summer, we went to Vacation Bible School. So, I learned about Zacchaeus... Thank goodness for Christian evangelists. They came and took care of the children during the summer. We had projects where we learned about the Bible, and that was my first exposure to Christianity. And, that has made all the difference. All the difference. I decided when I was in high school what kind of life I wanted to lead. And I thought definitely this Christian religion had so much more to offer than anything that I knew at the time.³⁷

This testimony displays the potency of the Gospel message. Even in the face of horrid injustice, the message of the Son of God redeeming the world has the power to redeem the horror

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Suzuki, *Ministry in the Assembly*, 40.

³⁷ Michiko Yee, “Japanese Internment with Grandma Yee”. *MOSAIC Station*. Podcast audio, May 2, 2019. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3VgWIppqm03X898z9AIunZ?si=rens8ITCTNmBNlgRKCTpyA>

experienced by a child during World War II. She goes on to say, “My life today, for which I am truly thankful for, has to include this experience [of the internment camps]. I believe that God had a plan for my life, and this was it. For, in camp I became acquainted with the Christian faith.”³⁸ Through her testimony, you can see her sheer strength and resilience. This is her lived theology. It testifies to the authenticity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ producing redemption in her life that also reaches far beyond her life. Two generations later, the Gospel of Jesus Christ would continue to produce redemption in brokenness. For the writer of this paper is her grandson and he is being healed by the broken body of Christ and forgiven by the shed blood of Christ. The loving strength of the Japanese Christians who evangelized in Camp Gila River will continue to produce peaceful fruits of righteousness throughout the generations.³⁹

Conclusion

While examining the ministry of Protestant Christians within the Japanese relocation centers complex factors surfaced. Questions of religious freedom were met by cultural discrimination against unassimilated Japanese immigrants. A desire for an ecumenical Protestant church faced theological, practical and cultural challenges. The cultural divide between the Issei and Nisei created a rift between the two generations, making it necessary to scaffold ministry uniquely to each generation. Messages merging Christianity with American nationalism promoted inauthentic conversion to Christianity from Buddhism. Although sociological factors may have prompted inauthentic identification with the Christian faith, testimony for Japanese Christians declares the redemptive work of Christ in the midst of complex circumstances.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Hebrews 12:11

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