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The Land of Eight Million Gods: Communicating Christian Concepts of God into the Japanese Worldview

Ray Franklin

Effective communication across cultural landscapes requires the utilization of thematic bridges – themes in one culture that resonate with corresponding themes in another culture. Nowhere is this truer than when communicating Christian concepts about God into the Japanese worldview. After years of study and reflection, this is something I am just now beginning to understand.

When “Yes” Means “Yes, Maybe”

One of my earliest opportunities to share Jesus in Japan came at the Tokyo Olympic Center. Located near Yoyogi station, this sprawling complex contained recreational facilities built during the 1967 Olympics. On this day, I was leaving the pool area after a workout when a businessman struck up a conversation in English – a good thing since I had just started language study. Being a passionate missionary, I soon pulled from my gym bag a bilingual copy of an evangelistic brochure and began to go through it with the man step by step. He seemed keenly interested as he followed along. At every step I would ask if he understood and each time he replied with an enthusiastic “yes” – or so I thought.

Upon reaching the end of the brochure, I asked this new friend if he would like to receive Jesus as his “Lord and Savior.” To this he replied with astonishment, “Why would I want to do that?” I was confused. He seemed to have been so receptive. How could he now appear to be so far from making the most important decision of his life?

I later realized that I had failed to understand two important things about communication in the Japanese culture. First, the Japanese word for “yes” is “*hai*.” “*Hai*” does not mean yes in the common English sense. It could mean “Yes, I think I understand you,” or “Yes, I hear the words coming out of your mouth,” or, “Yes, I am here simply being polite to you.” It almost never means, “Yes, I agree with what you are saying.”

My second communication failure had begun with my opening sentence, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” I had lost this man at the word, “God.” The Japanese word for god is *kami* (神), a word steeped in the religious tradition of Shinto (神道, The Way of the Gods.) *Kami* refers, not to the creator-God of the universe, but to the myriads of spirit-gods inhabiting the Japanese worldview. Though I was speaking in English, this man was understanding in Japanese. Accepting a *kami* as Lord and Savior made little to no sense for him.

A God of Love?

Years later, I encountered another language barrier. My family and I had returned for stateside assignment during my oldest daughter’s freshmen year at Ouachita Baptist University. Several Japanese exchange students attended OBU in the year 1999 to 2000, and I was given the wonderful opportunity of leading them in a weekly Bible study. During one of these sessions, a young lady questioned my use of the Japanese word, *ai* (愛), for love. “Don’t tell me God loves me,” she said, “It makes me feel creepy.” By this time in missionary career, I felt comfortable speaking in the Japanese language and had directly quoted *ai* from a well-respected Japanese Bible translation of John 3:16.

She explained that *ai* can communicate sexual connotations and could even be the kind of love a dog can have. I realized why its use with God made this student feel uneasy.

“So, what should I say?” I asked her.

“Tell me God protects me,” she replied.

The Japanese verb for protect is *mamoru* (守る). It is written in Kanji, or Chinese ideographs, with a character that pictures a father’s arms holding his child. Since then, I have always made it a point to heed this student’s advice. But my communication misadventures in Japanese did not end there.

The Lord of Middle Heaven

One day, toward the end of my time in Japan, a retired missionary by the name of Tom Masaki came all the way from his home in Hawaii to see me in my Tokyo office. (By that time, I had been given a leadership role that included an office in the Japan Baptist Mission's national headquarters.) Tom informed me that extensive research had convinced him traditional Japanese Bible translations use of the word *Kami* for God had been a huge mistake. The Japanese language contained a much better word for the Creator-God of the Bible. This indigenous word, *Ama-no-Naka-Nushi-Kami* (天之中主神, The Lord of Central Heaven God) had existed for centuries. In the ancient city of Kyoto, a Shinto courtyard housed a special place where this God was enshrined. By the time of Tom Masaki's visit, however, *Kami* had been the accepted word for God (אֱלֹהִים 'ēlō·hîm in Hebrew; θεός *theos* in Greek) since the earliest Bible translations of the 1800s.

To my knowledge, no Japanese Bible publisher ever accepted Tom's recommendation to change the word for God. However, our conversation that day further confirmed in my mind that the concept of a supreme, creator-God does exist in Japanese culture, whether the typical Japanese person is aware of it or not.

Like a Fish Out of Water

Back in the 1980s, during my time as a church planter on the island of Okinawa, Japan, a dear friend and colleague, Pastor Asato shared with me stories of the one true God handed down through Japanese oral tradition. Japanese who knew of these stories were aware of this God's existence. However, their culture taught that this God was so high above humans in rank that, according to an ancient proverb, "A person has no more business dealing with this God than a fish has being out of water." Instead, Japanese concerned themselves with the millions of spirit-gods inhabiting their religious thought world. For them, there were spirit-gods in the home, in the neighborhoods, on the mountains, among the trees, in ancient castles, family tombs (the ancestors), in Shinto shrines, and almost anywhere else one could imagine. The Japanese have an expression, *Yaonorozu no Kami* (八百万の神) that literally translates as "eight million gods." Even so, they know, or should know, that their own cultural traditions recognize the existence of a creator-God reigning supreme above all.

Guiding Principles for Communicating God to the Japanese

So, what is the best way to speak to the Japanese worldview concerning the God of the Bible? Here are some guiding principles based on the above observations:

- *Kami* alone can never adequately communicate the concept of the supreme God of the Bible.
- If *Kami* is to be used, it must be accompanied by modifiers such as *Zennou* (全能 all knowing), *Chichi-naru* (父なる Father), or *Ten-no* (天の Heavenly).
- That this God exists in their own cultural traditions must be clearly stated to the Japanese.
- Though the term *Ama-no-Naka-Nushi-Kami* may be helpful as a cultural bridge, it is too unwieldy and not widely recognized enough to have significant impact.
- The God of the Bible is a God of love, who protects us with divine agape love.
- This God is not to be ignored or manipulated. He in fact demands our attention and allegiance.
- To ignore this God is to dishonor him through unfaithfulness and shameful neglect.
- This God is the ultimate giver of life, breath, health, and everything good.
- We owe this God our dutiful allegiance for eternity.
- Jesus, through his work on the cross, has made the way for us to reach this God.

Faith in this God frees us from the unrealistic and overwhelming burden of placating so many so-called gods. Fear of Him alone replaces fear of retribution from these godlings with peace, joy, and assurance.

God in the Japanese Thought-World

- *Kami* (God)
- *Hito* (People, humans)
- *Rei* (Spirit-gods, often referred to as kami)
- *Jyuuutaki* (住宅 Traditional Japanese home)
- *Butsudan* (仏壇 Place for ancestor worship)
- *Hinukan* (火抜かん Kitchen fire god, Okinawa dialect)
- *Shiro* (城 Castle ruins, site for spirit worship)

- *Jinja* (神社 Shinto Shrine, in this case a graveyard)
- *Toori* (通り Entrance to Shinto Shrine)
- *Ohaka* (お墓 Family tomb, Buddhist)
- *Uganju* (拝所 Site for spirit worship, Okinawan dialect)
- *Ohaka* (お墓 Family tomb, Okinawa Shinto)
- *Jyujika* (十字架 Cross, representing Jesus the way to God)

About the Author

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