

REVITALIZATION MOVEMENTS THEORY AND JAPANESE MISSION

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Although Japan is known as one of the most Gospel-resistant nations, the country has remarkably demonstrated accommodating attitudes toward newly emerging religious movements since the time of the Meiji Restoration.¹ Even today religious cults are aggressively increasing their membership. The contrast of these two religious phenomena in Japan suggests two questions. First, why are Japanese so open to religious cults but not to the Gospel? Second, how can Christian mission incorporate and utilize Japanese religious accommodation for its benefit?

REVITALIZATION MOVEMENT THEORY

Anthony Wallace, a functional anthropologist, formulates the theory of revitalization movement by observing some historical cases of emerging religious movements. He defines the revitalization movement as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture”² According to Wallace, the members and the leaders of societies deliberately and consciously seek revitalization when their basic needs are not being met. A more satisfying culture is expected or created out of the organized effort to revitalize the old disintegrated culture.³ Although Wallace’s research was based on the Iroquois Indian society, which is animistic and tribal by nature, his theory is applicable to other societies that share similar

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¹There are more than 230,000 registered religious organizations in Japan according to the statistic by Japan Cultural Ministry in 2000. <http://www.relnet.co.jp/relnet/brief/r3-01.htm>

²Anthony Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 265. He distinguishes a revitalization movement from a classic culture change in that the former is a deliberate intent for a change by the members that occurs in a rather short period, while the latter is a slow, chain-like, self-continued process of super-organic inevitabilities.

³Anthony Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), 179.

qualities. Especially in Japanese society where animistic and tribal tendencies still exist, religious cults demonstrate the characteristics that Wallace describes.

Key Concepts

Wallace's revitalization theory is based on two key concepts: one is the concept of stress and the other is that of maze way.

Concept of Stress

Viewing a society as an organism, Wallace focuses on the mechanism of homeostasis in society. He suggests, "Homeostasis is a mechanism in which a system tries to preserve its integrity by maintaining a minimally fluctuating, life-supporting matrix and by taking emergency measures under conditions of stress to preserve the constancy of this matrix."⁴ When the system encounters some occasions in which its homeostasis is compromised, stress-reducing mechanisms usually work to restore it. However, when the society comes to the point that stress-reducing mechanisms have no effect, the society goes to a revitalization movement. In this framework, Wallace defines stress as "a condition in which the social organism is threatened with more or less serious damage."⁵ He lists some factors of stress: climate, ecological change, military defeat, political subordination, extreme pressure toward acculturation, economic distress, epidemics and so on. The list of stresses must be extended to the personal level to include such factors as human relationships, self-value, relative depravity, disorientation, emotional problems and so on.

Concept of Maze Way

Another key concept in understanding the revitalization movement theory is the "maze way." Wallace explains that every person in society, as a part of the societal organism, needs to have a mental image of society and its culture, as well as of his own body and its behavioral regularities, in order to act in ways which reduce stress at all levels of

⁴Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 265.

⁵Ibid., 266.

the system.⁶ The mental image is called a maze way. When one, under chronic stress, receives repeated information that one's maze way does not lead to an action which reduces the level of stress, one must choose to either maintain the present maze way and tolerate the stress, or change the maze way to another. This effort to change a maze way is the core of a revitalization movement.

Progressive Structure of Revitalization Movement

Wallace observes a progressive structure of the movement that is applicable to various situations other than the Iroquois Indian. He asserts the validity of the theory, suggesting that "such movements follow a remarkably uniform program throughout the world."⁷ The observed process includes (1) the steady state, (2) the period of increased individual stress, (3) the period of cultural distortion, (4) the period of revitalization, and (5) the new steady stage.

(1) The steady state is one in which "culturally recognized techniques for satisfying needs operate in a way that chronic stress varies within tolerable limits."⁸ Wallace contends, "During the first stage, the societal needs are basically met, and the stress in the system 'varies within tolerable limits'."⁹ Members would not question about their existing maze way in interpreting their life events. Therefore, even though some incidents fail to fulfill their expectations, they are likely to attribute the failure to their own neglect of some requirements in the old system.

(2) The period of individual stress is the stage in which tension rises. The causes, as mentioned above, can be varied from social uprooted-ness such as war, natural disaster, population explosion, and so forth, to personal difficulties such as loss of loved ones or property, unmet desires, or uncured diseases. The members of the society at this stage will look for a solution to relieve the tension, both internal and external. The latter is usually regarded as deviant and revolutionary at this stage.¹⁰

(3) The next stage is the period of cultural distortion. During this

⁶Ibid., 266.

⁷Wallace, *Religion*, 158.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Gaylin Van Rheenen, "Change in Animistic Societies," *Communicating Christ to Folk Religionists*. <http://www.missiology.org/folkreligion/chapter4.htm>. (accessed on 3 February 2005).

period the old meaning system fails to function in maintaining the social equilibrium and is continuously called into question. In this situation, society demonstrates “the regressive response” in the form of alcoholism, intra-group violence, ambivalent dependency, collapse of kinship, irresponsibility in public officials, states of depression and self-reproach, and a variety of psychosomatic and neurotic disorders.¹¹ Because the elements in society are not harmoniously related but rather mutually inconsistent, society expects and requires an alternative maze way. The new way, which was once conceived as deviant, is seen as significant alternative at this stage.

(4) The fourth stage is the revitalization period. Wallace observes six functional stages within the revitalization period:¹² (a) maze way reformulation in which the members begin to picture their society in a different way from the mainstream interpretation, (b) the innovator plays the prophet’s role and spreads the new maze way among interested people, (c) the prophets establish an organization that connects society with their perspectives, (d) the organization adapts to the resistance from society, and (e) as the number who accept the new maze way increases, a cultural transformation occurs.

The revitalization process comes to the end by accomplishing cultural transformation. Then, this new steady stage is the beginning of another cycle of the process.

ANALYZING JAPAN THROUGH REVITALIZATION THEORY

Applying Wallace’s revitalization theory to Japan, the present task is to analyze the stagnant situation of Japanese missions. Regarding the steady stage, Japan is a country that has not experienced colonization or any severe political threat during its history. Especially after WWII, Japan has rather enjoyed economical and cultural progress for more than a half century. In terms of basic needs, the country finds few applicable stress factors of which Wallace mentions. Due to the high stability as its society, Japan seems to be unprepared for revitalization.

Additionally, the Japanese traditional maze way is quite flexible and accommodating by nature, and it tolerates the problems and situations in society. This allows the social homeostasis to be

¹¹Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” 269.

¹²Ibid., 270-75.

maintained. Peter Lundell describes the nature of the Japanese maze way as Japanese cultural cobweb.¹³ Because the web is not only widely spread, but also flexible and persistent, once people are caught, they can hardly escape. Thus, revitalization as a society, but also individual conversion as a personal revitalization, is still difficult for the Japanese.

The second is individual-stress stage. The felt needs and problems of Japanese people are not those of basic needs. It is better expressed in the term “disorientation.” The problems Japanese face is more “existential” than external. It is not a problem of being damaged by some external cause, but is an anxiety of not knowing where they are going. Statistics confirm this. When asked about the initial object of the religious quest, the results were as follows: the meaning of life (40.4%), the way to live rightly (40.4%), the nature of true love (36.5%), fear of death (20.1%), and loneliness (18.3%).¹⁴ The problem for Japanese people in an affluent society is “disorientation” of their lives rather than material damage. The problems of disorientation are not only spatial and temporal, but also moral and spiritual. Another stress observed in contemporary Japanese society is that the people are seeking for the absolute axes for every aspect of their lives.

The third stage is cultural distortion. Japan, with its material affluence and political stability, seems to be satisfied with its traditional maze way. Therefore, it can be said that Japan has not yet reached the stage of cultural distortion. Thus, further stages of the revitalization theory are also to come in future.

CRITIQUE OF REVITALIZATION THEORY

The greatest contribution of Wallace’s revitalization movement theory is its progressive understanding that aids in the analysis of individual conversion. Christians in pagan societies like Japan tend to emphasize a dramatic experience of conversion, and to neglect the preconditions and post-conditions of the converts. It might be one cause for the lack of effective discipleship in Japan.

Wallace’s observation and analysis of each stage of revitalization

¹³Peter N. Lundell, “Behind Japan’s resistant web: Understanding the problem of Nihonkyo,” *Missiology* 23 (October): 401-412.

¹⁴Lutheran World Federation Office of Communication, Tokyo, “How Japanese Become Christians: Final Report of the Baptism motivation Survey of 1973-74,” in *Reader of Wheaton Extension Education, Audience Psychology*, ed. James Engel (Wheaton, Illinois: Wheaton Graduate School, 1974).

provide various insights for Japanese Christians in understanding why and how new religious cults are prospering in Japan. The religious cults are usually active in approaching people through felt needs. They are deceitful but apparently successful. Christians, on the other hand, tend to be centripetal and less active in reaching out to meet needs. The Christians seem rather content with fewer changes of their peaceful lives within the stained glass windows.

The second strength in the theory is its integration of the sociological and psychological approaches to revitalization. Lewis Rambo describes four approaches toward the study of conversion: (1) psychoanalytical approach which focuses on the role of depressions or suggestibility, (2) behavioral approach which emphasizes the immediate impact on conversion, (3) humanistic/transpersonal approach which focuses on the effect of conversion upon self-realization, and (4) social/holistic approach which views conversion both from social and internal aspects.¹⁵ He holds that conversion should be understood as a multilayered process including every aspect of human life. Wallace is partially in accord with this integrated approach through his use of both sociology and psychology.

However, there are weaknesses to the application of revitalization theory. The primary weakness of the theory is in its lack of the spiritual perspective. Wallace solely focuses on human and social dynamics as the cause of revitalization movements, and neglects any notion of a Divine God who is sovereign over the course of human history. In many cases of revitalization movement in Christian history, the movements were not just the outcome of the demand from the social situation, but were themselves divine interventions. Because Wallace's theory is based on his functional anthropologist's view of religion, he understands revitalization movements purely as a social process set in force in the needy places.

This leads to the recognition of the second weakness. As the theory presumes no absolute standard, it does not differentiate vicious cults from orthodox religion. The Christianity that is based on the revelation from God, and tested to be true by history, is radically different from artificial religions from below. The existing revelation of the Scripture is the evidence of the Supernatural being in it who is real and true.

¹⁵Luis Rambo, "The Psychology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard, 159-63 (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1992).

Moreover, the millions of witnesses of God's Spirit changing people's lives throughout the two-thousand years of Christian history cannot be merely explained within the framework of socio-psychological movements.

This second weakness is revealed in its primary focus on the phenomenological analysis of society and culture. Paul Hiebert describes a threefold structure of mental construction under a phenomena: (1) theories or maps and models which provide the person with practical answers raised by belief systems, (2) belief systems or paradigms, which determine the questions society is asking and provide methods of investigation, and (3) the worldview which integrates elements of culture as a whole. As Wallace approaches the issue from a functionalist's viewpoint, the integral role of worldview is not considered. In order to have a deeper understanding of revitalization movements, there ought to be not only the phenomenological and psychological analyses, but also a worldview analysis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPANESE MISSION

Wallace explained how people in stressful conditions can be open to a new maze way. Japanese Christians should be more sensitive to the felt needs of the nonbelievers. Discovering and approaching the "white field" is the strategic way for evangelization of Japan. Therefore, church ministries must be more target-oriented, so that they can provide more effective approaches to the groups with specific needs for communicating the Gospel.

The Word of God needs to be understood, proclaimed and demonstrated both in the message and life so that people can see the stability and strength in Christian life. The relevancy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people's felt needs and to the deepest needs should be clearly manifested. In order to do so, Japanese churches need to be open to change, allowing the Holy Spirit to work freely for revival. Complacency, maintaining the status quo, fear and reluctance to change could result in refusing the revitalization of the Church itself.

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