

[TRANSLATION]

WHY I BECAME A UNITARIAN

A Sermon Delivered by the Rev. Andrew Y. Kuroda
on April 22, 1962 to the Japanese Christian
Fellowship, Grace Reformed Church, Washington, D.C.

I have decided to resign from Grace Reformed Church, and to join the All Souls Unitarian Church. I have come to this decision after many years of thinking and deliberation. I should like to briefly trace my spiritual pilgrimage and tell why I became a Unitarian.

My father became a Christian in the late 1870's. For embracing Christianity he was disowned by his family for two years. In 1883 he was graduated from the Theological School of Meiji Gakuin in Tokyo. My mother was also a devout Christian, having been converted before her marriage.

My father devoted his entire life to the ministry, working among the personnel of the naval base at Yokosuka. My entire life in Japan, except for five years of schooling in Tokyo, was spent in this Christian home. As I recall it now, it was, as it were, a Christian reservation in a non-Christian society. (Because of the location of our house, we had very little to do with festivals or other similar community observances. My close friends were from the families of my father's church. I can still remember instances in my childhood when I was teased by some children as "Yaso" (derogatory term for a Christian, derived from "Iesu".)

When I finished grammar school, my father instructed me in Christianity. His was a conservative Calvinistic theology, which I accepted in pre-critical naivete. Reared in such a Christian atmosphere that later I felt a sense of guilt at missing church for any reason.

I chose the ministry for my life work shortly before my graduation from Meiji Gakuin College. For about a year until I entered Auburn Theological Seminary in Auburn, New York; in 1934, I audited several courses in the Japan Theological Seminary (now the Tokyo Union Theological Seminary). That was the beginning of my intellectual inquiry into Christianity.

At that time the theology of Karl Barth was spreading like wildfire throughout the churches in Japan. Its popularity among the Japanese intellectual Christians was aided by the fact that the then most influential philosophers in Japan, Drs. Kitaro Nishida and Hajime Tanabe, were developing their thinking along dialectical lines. It was when I was auditing a course given by Dr. Hidenobu Kuwada, now the President of the Tokyo Union Theological Seminary that his Benshohoteki Shingaku (Dialectical Theology) came from the press. Even Professor Enkichi Kan of the Episcopal Divinity School of St. Paul's University in Tokyo publicly announced his conversion to Barthianism.

It was some ten years later that Barth's influence took its effect in the United States. My theological approach during my seminary years in America was entirely Barthian. My Master's thesis written in 1938 for the Biblical Seminary in New York was The Idea of the Revelation in the Theology of Emil Brunner. The late Professor Edwin Lewis of the Drew Theological Seminary was one of the American theologians who early accepted the Barthian theology. He taught a course at the Biblical Seminary. I wrote a term paper on Christology in his course. He singled out my paper and commended it in class. It was based entirely on Barthian theology.

After receiving a Master's degree in 1938, I took a pastorate in the State of Washington and three years later in Oregon. About this time I began raising questions about Barthianism. My questioning revolved primarily around two areas: one dealing with its methodology and the other with its central teaching.

I realized that Barth's alleged dialectical approach was not really dialectical at all. Barth holds human reason in extremely low regard. He stresses man's inability to know God by any act of his own. When man accepts God's revelation in utter abandon of his reliance of reason, Barth says, God is known to him. This is what Barth calls faith. Faith is not what man can acquire; it is given to him. It is a gift of God, says Barth. What I realized was that Barth does not realize that his system of theology is actually a result of his reasoning. Dialectics is a logic of tension that exists between

God and man in God's approach to man and man's approach to God. But Barth speaks only of God's approach to man and I realized that it was a defective dialectic.

The second problem was one that had bothered me ever since I began theologizing. I did not understand the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ. In the theology of Karl Barth, Jesus' incarnation is presented as the special revelation to be understood only by faith, distinct from the general revelation which human reason can understand. I was not convinced by this arrangement, yet I used it as a basis for my preaching. I inquired about this problem of my ministerial colleagues and of my former professors. None of their answers were convincing; in summary they said, "You must accept it by faith."

I came to avoid touching upon this sensitive spot in my theological probing. When I had to deal with the issue in my sermons, I just repeated, parrot-like, the traditional theological formula. I was dissatisfied with this position and greatly displeased with myself for not being able to resolve the impasse.

The war took me away from actual parish work. When I returned from an overseas assignment in early 1946, I took a position in the Library of Congress. About the same time I began to serve as a minister to the Japanese Christian Fellowship in Washington, and this was a momentous point in my spiritual pilgrimage.

The economic independence of a pastorate gave me intellectual independence as well. I now realize how strongly financial dependence plays upon a minister as an unconscious restraint not to deviate too far from the official doctrinal position of the church in traditional Christianity. If one is declared a heretic, one loses one's livelihood. Had I remained in the West Coast pastorate, I might probably have made an intellectual compromise somewhere and brainwashed myself while repeating the official theological formulas.

Three occasions accelerated my religious quest after I came to Washington.

(1) I was asked to teach "The Life of Jesus" to an adult class of the First Evangelical and Reformed Church. Christianity says that if you are confronted with Jesus, you will be led to confess that he is the Christ. I set about to find out for myself. The books of the New Testament, including the Gospels, are products of the early Church and are therefore colored with its christological ideas. The information is scanty, but still the Gospels enable us to know what kind of a person Jesus was and what kind of religious ideas he had.

(2) Shortly after the Japanese Christian Fellowship moved to Grace Reformed Church, several Japanese scientists engaged in research in the National Institutes of Health began to attend our services regularly. It was the first time that they had ever been exposed to Christianity. Many missionaries of a number of denominations had gone to postwar Japan. Few Japanese, unless they had a Christian background, would discriminate various types of Christian teachings they might encounter. I was eager that these NIH scientists not be disillusioned by a narrow dogmatic type of Christianity should they continue to go to a church upon their return to Japan, and decided, accordingly, to present the highest type of Christianity I could envision. As I preached on the Bible, God, Jesus, salvation, miracles, prayers, etc., I wrestled with myself to reappraise traditional theological positions and decide whether they had any relevance to the religious quest of modern, scientifically oriented persons.

(3) The problem of Christianity in Japan also lodged in my thinking. This was prompted by a periodical study of Japan as the subject of a mission study in many American churches. I was asked to speak on Christianity in Japan in several churches in this area. These pep talks, so to speak, were intended to enlist further support of the church missions, and therefore, they usually gloss over any difficulties which confront the proselytizing activities of the church.

Christianity was briefly very popular immediately after the war in Japan. But the opinion polls and statistics I examined indicated that the growth rate of the church fell behind even the prewar level. I set out to probe the cause of this general non-acceptance of Christianity by the Japanese under circumstances most favorable for Christianity. I took a new interest in the history of Japanese thought, the spiritual traits of the Japanese and related subjects.

Most of the comments I read about the present plight of Christianity in Japan do not go beyond pointing out the fact that Japan is of so radically different a cultural soil that Christianity has difficulty in taking roots there. An excellent joint study sponsored by the Kiristokyo Gakuto Kyodaidan (Christian Scholars Brotherhood) under the title Kindai Nihon To Kiristokyo (Christianity and Modern Japan) is no exception. Participants, both Christians and non-Christians, well known scholars of various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, never dared to bring Christianity itself as a target of critical appraisal for its failure in making any appreciable inroad into Japanese society. Many of the early socialists and labor movement leaders, for instance, started in their movements under the influence of Christianity, but they soon abandoned the faith. One Christian participant dismissed their apostasy by saying that "They really did not understand Christianity." Why didn't they?

Japan is the most westernized nation in the non-Western world. The Japanese are capable of appreciating philosophy, literature, arts and music, to say nothing of science and technology of the Western world. Yet they do not accept Christianity as readily as had been expected. To speak only of the differences in the spiritual and cultural climate and heritage is to consider only half the problem. The other half of the problem must be to see what is in Christianity that prevents the Japanese from accepting it.

My spiritual pilgrimage was oriented and prompted by thinking through these problems that I have just outlined. Doubtless, it will continue to the end. I have reached a stage, however, where I find myself compelled to make my theological position clear, if I want to be fair and honest with you as well as with myself. I shall try to describe it briefly.

(1) I have found that the religion of Jesus is different from the traditional Christianity which, I regard, is a religion about Jesus. The church proclaims the kerygma that "Jesus is the Christ." I have found this different from the gospel that Jesus preached.

I had to probe the reasons why the early church came to have settled on that position. I studied the history of the messianic ideas of Israel. I tried to understand the messianic conception of the contemporaries of Jesus, of his disciples, and the Christology of Paul.

Christ is now considered the Savior of mankind, spiritual, supranational and universal. But the Messiah at the time of Jesus was the political figure inseparable from the extremely nationalistic chosen people concept of the Jewish people. It was inevitable that Jesus shared the messianic idea as a child of the age. But I do not believe that Jesus regarded himself as the Messiah. Some of his religious ideas are diametrically opposed to the current ideas connected with the Messiah.

After Jesus' death his disciples were convinced that Jesus was really the Messiah and looked forward to his early return. That was still within the framework of Israel's messianic concepts. Paul, however, developed his idea of Christ departing from the messianic concept of the Jews. He was born and brought up on gentile soil and exposed to various salvationist mystery religions and Gnosticism which he later had to confront and combat by presenting Jesus as the Christ. It was in this particular spiritual climate and historical context that Paul interpreted Jesus and presented him as Christ the Lord (Kyrios Christos). It does not necessarily follow that those of different spiritual climate and historical context, when confronted with Jesus, must come to the same conclusion as Paul did. But traditional Christianity makes Paul's faith the core of its dogma and declared it as the universal truth relevant to all peoples at all times.

I believe that herein lie the limitation and the irrelevance of Christianity which make it difficult for the non-Western people like Japanese to accept it. The following excerpt from a paper, Senkyo No Tsumazuki (The Stumbling Block of Preaching) by Professor Jisaburo Matsuki of Kwansai Gakuin University School of Theology supports my contention here.

After hearing my sermons some people from my audiences have told me, "I recognize my weakness, my impotence, and my sinfulness. I believe in God and his love. But I cannot accept that Jesus Christ is the once and for all revelation of God in which alone lies my salvation. If Christ's cross and resurrection are regarded as symbols of judgment and salvation, I can understand that. But to me the stumbling block is the Church's insistence that the once and for all historical event of Jesus is necessary for my salvation." I wanted to remove this stumbling block. But insofar as I base my preaching on the New Testament, I cannot remove it, and I share the mental anguish of these people. (Shingaku Kenkyu [Theological Studies], 6 (June 1957, p. 49).

I am sure Professor Matsuki's difficulty will remain so long as his handling of the Bible is based on the premise that it is the divinely inspired Word of God, outside of the realm of historical criticism. Millions upon millions of human beings existed before Jesus and never dreamed that such a person would ever walk on the surface of the earth. Millions upon millions of peoples have lived and are still living on earth since Jesus who never knew or know that such a person ever lived. To me nothing is more fantastic than a teaching that men cannot be saved unless they believe in that person as the Christ.

Traditional Christianity insists that it is the "Christian truth," as if to say that the addition of a word "Christian" will make it a special kind of truth. These serious minded Japanese who went to hear Professor Matsuki's sermons are not the only ones who stumbled over this so-called "Christian truth." A countless number of Western men have also rejected this "truth" as seen in the long history of Christian church. I believe that this "Christian truth" has been perpetuated largely because the church, ever since it banished the minority who lost the vote in the first ecclesiastical council, ruthlessly liquidated and suppressed with its iron power those who did not accept it. Fortunately, these days people do not lose their lives for disagreeing with the official theological positions of the church. But some people are still cut off from their source of livelihood when they disagree with the church's teaching. You will recall that some years ago several young ministers of the Northwest Synod of the Lutheran Church in Wisconsin were tried for heresy for being unable to accept the Apostles' Creed. Some changed to a different denomination and others recanted their position. The New York Times reported only about a month ago that a professor in Princeton Theological Seminary was tried by his presbytery for refusing to accept the fact of the virgin birth of Jesus. Presumably he will lose his chair in the seminary unless the higher ecclesiastical judiciary overrules the decision of the presbytery.

(2) Man sins because he is finite. Those who consider themselves saved through faith in Christ also sin, because their faith in Christ does not convert them into infinite beings. The religious quest I am pursuing deals with this concern of man. To me the confession of Jesus as the Christ does not solve the problem of man and his sin.

Some people experience the forgiveness of sin by faith in Christ. I, however, believe, that they experience the disappearance of the sense of guilt, which was largely created by the church's teaching of sin primarily as disobedience to God when man feels unable to accept wholeheartedly the teaching of the church.

The problem of sin is complicated, but to take a simple case, for example, if a person against whom I have sinned, does not forgive me, and continues to be hostile toward me, what good would it do in my relation to this person, even if I think myself saved by faith in Jesus Christ? That is why Jesus put the forgiving love at the center of his religion.

Jesus as a child of the age shared some of his contemporary religious ideas. He apparently believed that the end of the world was near as he shared the messianic expectation of the Jews of his days. He was not immune to the limitation of historical perspective. But the permanent and relevant value of his religion, I believe, is his teaching of forgiving love. It is the idea and not a person who advanced such an idea that is important. It is the emergence of such an idea in the history of mankind that is important.

Traditional Christianity, however, insists that what is important is not the idea but the person of Jesus, whom the church declares as the Christ. It also makes the acceptance of this formula a prerequisite to salvation. This seems to me a new religious legalism. Jesus fought vigorously against any form of legalism in religion.

(3) Traditional Christianity worships Christ as God. I categorically oppose deification of a mortal, whether he be a Jesus, an emperor, or a General Nogi. Christianity severely criticizes as pagan practice the worshipping of man in other religions. But it insists that the case of Christ as the Lord is of an entirely different order. My intellectual integrity cannot tolerate a double standard of critical judgment.

(4) Traditional Christianity insists that reason is incapable of understanding the Christian truth that Jesus is the Christ, and that by faith alone it can be accepted. Thus the church places faith above reason.

I believe faith is necessary for the finite man. It is the thing which orients and pushes man on as he stands at the limits of his human finiteness; it adjoins and is compatible with reason. But the faith of which the church speaks is not this kind of faith. It means accepting what the church declares to be truth despite human reason. It is a kind of special knowledge by which, according to the church, man can enter into the secret of Christianity, a new type of Gnosis.

When I discussed my religious ideas with a minister friend, he said, "Then it won't be Christianity." My response was "So what?" To me, a religious quest is a quest for the truth. Truth is one, but man's understanding of truth grows with the expanding knowledge of his existence. I cannot believe that truth can be shut up in the narrow confines of any system of thought. My primary concern is to pursue the truth no matter what the consequences. I cannot suspend my religious quest in order to defend and to preserve traditional Christianity.

Just as we belong to one nation or another, so are we affiliated with one religion or another. I am in the tradition of Christianity (and regard myself as being within the Christian religion.) But when I no longer can accept Jesus as the Christ, I must go to a denomination which does not require it as a condition of membership. That is why I have decided to become a Unitarian. I believe that my religious quest can be best carried out in the Unitarian Church.

I have preached to you from this pulpit for the past sixteen years. My religious quest in those years was possible only because you gave me the opportunity to pursue it in complete freedom to preach what I felt during my quest. I am deeply grateful to you for your patience and open-mindedness. I hope very much that you will not think that my sermons will be entirely different from the new pulpit. I shall be preaching in much the same way as I have been preaching to you in the past several years. I have no intention whatsoever of forcing my ideas upon you. It is entirely up to your decision as to whether you will come to hear me at the All Souls Church. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for your kindnesses and friendships of the past and my wish that they may be continued in the future.