Buddhist Organizations and Their Response to Natural Disasters

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1. PREFACE

THE Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, marked a turning point in modern Japanese history. The unprecedented violence of the 9.0 magnitude quake gave rise massive tsunami that caused a great number of fatalities. According to the most recent data, 15,890 people died and 2,589 remain missing. Approximately 180,000 people are still living in temporary housing. Further, the impact on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown compounded the damage, releasing radiation that has forced 150,000 people to flee their homes to live in conditions of insecurity and anguish.

What has been the impact of this compound disaster on the psychology of the Japanese people and on Japanese religions? It could be said to have had a unique significance for Japan as a country that, over the past century and a half, had successfully pursued a path of modernization and rapid economic growth. The disaster has made evident the underlying fragility of the worldview developed over the course of this period, sparking an intense process of reflection on what it means to be human, beyond and outside the context of economics. At the same time, the disaster has been an occasion for people to confront questions of human powerlessness, weakness and vulnerability. The experience may prove to be a germinal one in terms of renewing people's awareness of forces that transcend human agency, in this way perhaps giving rise to new worldviews.

Religious individuals and organizations made important contributions in responding to the disaster, the magnitude of which—and the depth of the resulting human suffering—overwhelmed the capacities of secular authorities. The inadequacy of the official response was evident to all observers and deeply impressed a mistrust of the authorities and officials

in the Japanese consciousness. This is the backdrop for the activities undertaken by religious individuals and organizations, activities that were conducted largely outside the context of existing of administrative frameworks.

The Japanese archipelago has always been subject to natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, floods and volcanic eruptions. In the Great Hanshin Earthquake of January 1995, some 6,500 people lost their lives. Many volunteer organizations responded to this disaster, and it is seen as marking the start of a new era of volunteerism in modern Japan. Religious people and organizations were part of relief efforts, although these were in many ways tentative and unorganized.

In the wake of the March 11, 2011 compound disaster, the lessons learned from these earlier experiences were incorporated, leading to more effective relief and support activities. In fact, it would seem that secular volunteer activities came to be seen as an integral aspect of the lives of religious people; the line demarcating these two realms has been blurred.

Starting in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and continuing to the present, religious individuals and organizations, both traditional and new, have engaged in a range of relief activities. These have included: 1) The use of religious facilities as emergency shelters; 2) Providing centers for longer-term support for displaced persons; 3) Provision of cooked meals for survivors; 4) Debris removal; 5) Searching for and location of the missing; 6) Providing relief supplies; 7) Support for children orphaned in the disaster; 8) Clean-up of radioactive pollutants; 9) Fund-raising; 10) Memorial services for the dead; 11); Psychological support; 12) "Listening activities."

From among the many different religious actors involved in such activities, I would like focus on the activities of Buddhists and to offer some observations on the special characteristics of Japanese Buddhism's engagements in the public space.

2. The Position of Buddhism in Contemporary Japanese Society

This section examines the social context for disaster relief activities conducted by religious individuals and organizations in contemporary Japan. As the focus of this paper is the involvement of Buddhists, the examples cited below will be limited to Buddhists and Buddhist organizations.

In Japan, the system of beliefs and practices known as "State Shinto"

has been principally concerned with maintaining the order of the national society as a whole. (While prewar State Shinto was dismantled, its influence persists even today in undeniable ways.) In contrast, the principal interest of Buddhism in Japan has been maintenance of the traditional household and village community order. Household and community ancestor rites have served as a symbol of the ritual connections that bind people together. In the years after World War II, Japanese society experienced the dissolution of the unifying power of the household and the village community. This was the price paid for economic growth. For people who were deprived of their reference group through this process, the new Buddhist-based religious movements that emerged to teach more individualized forms of salvation were appealing, and this drove their growth. Forms of Buddhism that existed prior to the emergence of these new movements are referred to in Japan as traditional Buddhism.

Traditional Buddhism stressed connections with and among parishioners. Funerary ceremonies, in particular, were a vehicle for rooting people within extended family networks and local communities. The families of the priests of more established temples gained prominence within the local community, fulfilling certain key functions. While the role played Buddhist temples has been diminishing, in rural farming or fishing communities, they continue to provide a locus for foundational social bonds.

Buddhist-based new religious movements such as Soka Gakkai, Reiyukai and Rissho Kosei-kai have promoted teachings of this-worldly human transformation, and this has helped them gain acceptance among urbanized populations deprived of the ties of household and native place. The bonds among lay believes have also been stressed in these religious movements but, in contrast to traditional Buddhist, the focus of teaching and guidance has been the individual.

During the period of high levels of economic growth, Japan experience the rapid and dramatic formation of a new secular society. Through the expansion of opportunities for higher education, secular knowledge was widely disseminated and opportunities for young people to engage with religion were greatly diminished. As a result, systems of secular knowledge became the basis for social participation and contribution. Despite the flourishing of new Budddhist-based religious movements in this period, the dominant values of Japanese society were all mediated through secular knowledge systems.

Starting in the 1970s, the pace of economic growth slowed, and dissatisfaction with secular society and its values in some cases took the

form of new spirituality movements and interest in a more spiritual cultural orientation. This trend was especially prominent within the more educated strata of society. As is well known, the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo Sarin gas attacks represented a very rare but extreme example of a group that used an eschatological worldview to justify its murderous activities.

The emergence of these new spirituality movements, however, did not alter the fact that the dominant values of Japanese society remained centered on secular knowledge and knowledge systems. For this reason, discourse in the public sphere continued to be conducted in the language of administrative forms knowledge rooted in secular knowledge systems, something that was undergirded by a strong faith in, and reliance on, science and scientific knowledge.

This arrangements was a good fit with the postwar dispensation stressing the separation of politics and religion. Through this, the public and private spheres were strictly distinguished, with religious values relegated to the latter. Religiosity was, to the degree possible, banished from the public sphere.

Any involvement by religious organizations in the public sphere came to be viewed with disapproval. Japanese society had been successful in its efforts to promote rapid economic growth, and this generated support for the system. Thus, while Buddhist organizations engaged in activities to promote peace and contribute to social welfare, these were understood to belong to the private sphere, with the impact on the public sphere minimized. The Japanese media self-identified as the gatekeepers of the public sphere and thus rarely, if ever, covered the social contributions of Buddhist organizations.

The January 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake changed all that. Many religious bodies, representing both traditional Buddhism and new Buddhist religions movements, actively engaged in disaster relief activities, even if these were marked by a lack of professionalism and were conducted on an ad hoc basis. This disaster marked the moment when, for the first time in Japanese postwar history, religious organizations stepped into to fill the gap left by a public sector unable to respond adequately to the overwhelming scale of destruction.

This corresponded with the trend of the late 1990s toward smaller, more limited government. The political climate that favored the adoption of neoliberal policies invited greater participation by private-sector volunteers in social welfare activities that had previously been considered the responsibility of the public sector. In 1998, the Act on Promotion of Specified Non-profit Activities went into effect, opening the way for greater participation by Buddhists in secular NPOs as well as the

formation of NPOs by Buddhist bodies.

This was the societal backdrop against which Buddhist organizations, even as they adhered to the essential assumptions of separation of religion and politics, became more actively involved in the public sphere.

When we consider the relief activities undertaken by Buddhist organizations following the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, it is important to bear the historical and social setting outlined above in mind. This massive, compound disaster has compelled a rethinking of the role of religious organizations in the public sphere.

3. What did the Great East Japan Earthquake Change?

Many Japanese people experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake as an event that compelled a questioning of the value system that had previously prevailed. This questioning had two particular aspects.

The first was a new mistrust of government and science. Despite warnings issued by some in the scientific community regarding the risk of massive tsunami, these were disregarded as merely theoretical, with the result that measures to deal with such an eventuality were put off. It further became clear that that Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) had been aware of the tsunami risk, but failed to take this seriously. The government's response to radioactive pollutants has invited additional mistrust, and there is a strong sense that the existing system of crisis management must be fundamentally rethought.

The second change involved a reassessment of religious values. While the disaster cannot be said to have sparked a nationwide movement for religious revival, many people have come to feel that secular knowledge systems alone cannot adequately respond to the needs and questions posed by suffering and destruction on such a massive scale—the grief of losing family members, for example, or the need for some source of explanation or solace. It is recognized that neither the secular authorities nor the scientific community is capable of responding to these needs or providing the needed answers.

At the very least, many people have come to look favorably on the disaster relief activities undertaken by various religious organizations. While a small minority of religious organizations have been criticized for taking advantage of the disaster to incite anxiety and engage in aggressive proselytization, most religious organizations not only provided material support, but also engaged empathetically with survivors, sharing their grief and offering prayers for the deceased alongside the survivors.

This has involved a reappraisal of religious organizations which, because of their confinement to the private sphere, had largely been seen as organizations principally concerned with the pursuit of their own interests. The activities of religious organizations has provoked a questioning of the existing bifurcation of the public and private realms. At a minimum, barriers to the entry of religious values into the public sphere have been reduced.

4. Disaster Relief Activities by Buddhist Organizations

Next I would like to introduce some examples of the kinds of activities for disaster relief undertaken by Buddhist organizations.

4-1 Examples from Traditional Buddhism

Many of the temples affiliated with traditional Buddhists sects continue to function as a cohesive factor in the bonds of households and communities.

Temples which were spared destruction in the disaster collaborated with secular authorities and NPOs to provide various forms of material assistance. Then, as activities shifted to the reconstruction phase, these temples provided support to survivors in the following unique forms.

1) Supporting community recovery and reconstruction through the holding of traditional religious events. In many more traditional communities, an annual cycle of ceremonies and festivals has long been maintained, and many of these are intimately associated with temples. The disaster made the holding of these festivals impossible and thus the revival of these customary practices and ceremonies offered and opportunity for displaced people to renew their sense of community and community bonds. Various newspaper articles have referenced this and the power of traditional arts and ceremonies to serve as a vehicle for collective identity and prayer.[1]

2) "Volunteer sutra reciters." This is a term that appeared frequently in news reports in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. The number of fatalities and widespread destruction created conditions in which it was impossible to conduct adequate funerary services for the victims. Buddhist priests volunteered to perform sutra recitations, something traditionally considered essential to any commemoration of the dead, at ad hoc funerary services without concern for distinctions among the sectarian affiliation of the deceased. There are

reports of participants expressing their appreciation for the prayers and sutra recitations offered by these priests. Further, temples accepted remains, providing a temporary resting place for these, again without regard to distinctions of affiliation.

3) Buddhist temples also organized charity events, with the proceeds dedicated to the operation of temporary housing.

4) Finally, traditional Buddhist temples engaged in volunteer "listening activities." The Soto sect of Zen Buddhism has a particularly large concentration of temples in the afflicted regions, and a traditional tea-style ceremony called "Gyocha" is part of the sect's liturgical repertoire. Centered around the sharing of tea, this ceremony provides a time of quiet reflection and exchange about one's Buddhist practice. The purpose of this ceremony has traditionally been to encourage greater religious awareness and a return to one's true self. Gyocha ceremonies organized for the benefit of survivors by Buddhist priests acting as "listening volunteers" provided a quiet interlude in which survivors enduring severe psychological trauma and challenging circumstances could partake in a shared sense of life and living. Through this, it was hoped that survivors would be able to regain some degree of normality and begin the process of recovering a sense of themselves in the context of daily life. The activities of these listening volunteers provide a form of mental health care for survivors.[2]

4-2 The Example of the Soka Gakkai

Here I would like to introduce the activities of the Soka Gakkai, the largest of the new Buddhist religions in Japan.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the Soka Gakkai moved quickly to establish a task force dedicated to responding to the disaster, assessing the scale of destruction and the resulting need for relief support. The group's Tohoku Culture Center, its largest facility in the afflicted region, served as a temporary shelter for 1,000 survivors. In total, Soka Gakkai facilities provided temporary shelter for approximately 5,000 people. Within 12 hours of the disaster, emergency supplies had arrived, and by the following day, some 5,550 handmade rice balls had been delivered from areas that had been spared destruction. The scope and speed of these relief activities demonstrated the networked response capabilities of this new religious movement. Further, the Soka Gakkai's facilities were used as the base for the activities of the Miyagi Prefecture fire

fighting company.[3]

The Soka Gakkai also mobilized its nationwide network to provide emergency relief supplies to temporary shelters; in total some 20,000 Soka Gakkai volunteers participated in relief activities. The organization's community-based networks were used to help locate the whereabouts of survivors, serving the needs of both believers and nonbelievers alike. Relief and support activities were able to reach people in locations inaccessible to official responders. There are many recorded examples of Soka Gakkai members who were at once victims impacted by the disaster and active protagonists in the relief work. This is a reflection of the nature of the organization, which has always emphasized the engagement and agency of lay believers, something which stands in contrast to the activities of traditional Buddhism, which tend to be led by ordained Buddhist priests.

At the same time, the Soka Gakkai developed volunteer activities with the participation of specific cohorts within its membership: doctors and nurses who provided volunteer health counseling; lawyers, accountants and tax specialists who provided volunteer counseling in their respective areas of expertise. Needless to say, among the membership there were many people who were injured or killed, or who lost family members. The question of why people had to experience such incomprehensible suffering was subjected to various interpretations; for many people, the experience remained something that could not be communicated or discussed in words. The empathetic presence of fellow members has been seen to lighten the psychological burden and to serve as an impetus for victims to begin to look toward the future.

It would seem that the presence of this network of empathetic connection and sharing has functioned as a more effective form of support than any metaphysical explanation of the cause or meaning of the disaster.

5. Explaining the Disaster

Why did people guilty of no apparent crime have to suffer so terribly? It is only natural that a disaster of this magnitude should be the occasion for thinking about such questions of theodicy. In April, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI, gave the following response to a question posed by a member of a television audience, a Japanese girl who asked why children had to experience such grief: "There may not be an answer, but the important thing thing is that God is by your side."[4]

For Christians living in Japan, the earthquake was the occasion for an energetic debate on the question of theodicy: how was the divine mean-

ing implicit in the disaster to be interpreted? While the responses were varied, they could be classed into the following three categories. 1) God is not in fact omnipotent; 2) God is omnipotent, but chose not to intervene; and 3) God in fact intervened.[5] Christians only comprise about 2 percent of the entire Japanese population,[6] and so arguments of this type of monotheistic theodicy are generally unfamiliar and not felt to be particularly relevant by most people.

Soon after the disaster, Shintaro Ishihara, the Tokyo Metropolitan Governor, expressed his view that the earthquake was a form of "divine retribution" and called on the Japanese people to free themselves of selfish desire and reform their way of life. Although he stressed that his was his personal opinion, he was subjected to harsh criticism for a lack of sensitivity to the suffering of the victims and was compelled to retract and apologize for this statement the following day. It would seem that the majority of Japanese people have an unconscious stance of rejecting any interpretation suggesting that the disaster had some meaning of punishment or retribution. This could be understood as constituting a cultural background that overtly rejects the idea of theodicy. There is particular reluctance to discuss the disaster in theoditic language in the presence of surviving victims or the dead.

Buddhists did not generally encourage or engage in discussions of theodicy in relation to the disaster, or at the least refrained from such discourse in the presence of victims. Most Japanese nationals viewed the disaster as a natural phenomenon and were not inclined to debate questions of divine involvement or intervention. Rather, the view of life's transience—something perhaps particular to the Japanese people, born of the repeated historical experience of disaster—produced a sense of acceptance and resignation in the face of inevitable suffering. This does not, however, mean that Japanese people are entirely indifferent to attempts to discover or identify the meaning of the death and destruction wrought by disasters.

In pre-modern Japanese society, natural disasters were understood to be messages from indigenous deities, the *kami*, whose anger was to be propitiated with offerings. More recently, the twin processes of modernization and secularization have undermined faith in the existence of the *kami*: rather than pray to the *kami*, people put their faith in science. In an age when prayers offered to the *kami* lack credibility, the victims of the earthquake found their faith in science brutally betrayed by the enormity of the suffering wrought by the compound disaster. In the face of this inexplicable, insoluble challenge, in which despair had no prospect of giving rise to meaning, people felt they had no option but to resolutely

accept the reality of the situation.

Most Buddhists and Buddhist organizations in Japan did not make any attempt to offer theoditic or causal interpretations. Rather, they focused on the making themselves available to people in their suffering, engaging with them in the empathetic sharing of suffering and pain, working together to reorient toward the future. This was the form taken by most of the pastoral support extended to the disaster victims by Japanese Buddhism.

In the case of the Soka Gakkai, SGI President Ikeda offered the following the message to people of the afflicted region: "The treasures of the heart [a term from Nichiren Buddhism indicating a state of inner richness and happiness] cannot be destroyed by even the harshest suffering." "Life is eternal. We remain connected by bonds that transcend the bounds of life and death." "Do not be defeated! Maintain courage! Hold on to hope!"

Here the disaster is not discussed in terms of theodicy. Rather, a spirit of empathy and making oneself available to the victims is in evidence. The Soka Gakkai cites the following phrase from Nichiren's writings as a model of empathy: "The varied sufferings that all living beings undergo—all these are Nichiren's own sufferings." This is seen as an expressing an ideal of engaging with suffering people, for offering continuous encouragement to them to face and overcome that suffering.

The stance taken by Japanese Buddhists in response to the disaster has a consistency across lines of sectarian difference. That is, they virtually all focused on offering spiritual empathy for the victims, including through offering prayers for the deceased, and sought to encourage survivors in their efforts to start looking to the future.

In closing, I would like to share the view of a Theravada Buddhist, Alubomulle Sumanasara (1945–), who is quite widely read in Japan. He is known for having propagated early Buddhism within the Japan Theravada Buddhist Association and guided people in meditative practices.

Rejecting the idea that the disaster represented some form of divine retribution, Sumanasara emphasized that the natural disaster was no one in particular's fault. The real question is whether one experiences this as suffering and is spiritually overwhelmed by it, or whether one can live as a truly wise person. He does not consider the disaster in terms of karmic causality, but rather in terms of how people experience suffering in the face of a particular phenomenon, in this case a natural disaster, emphasizing a more agentic interpretation of the meaning of karma and the importance of living with wisdom.[7] In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the Japan Theravada Buddhist Association made its place of

practice available as a temporary shelter and organized the cooking and delivery of meals for victims along with donations of books to libraries, the collection of relief funds, and other activities.

In this way, the disaster relief activities of Buddhists and Buddhist organizations were widely recognized within contemporary Japanese society. These individuals and organizations fulfilled a role within the public sphere, gaining, in the process, a greater voice in society.

Notes

[1] Hisai dento geino [Traditional performing arts in the affected areas]. The Nikkei, 15 March 2014.

[2] [online] http://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/teqw/20130925.html [Accessed 1 April 2016]

[3] The editors of *Ushio*, ed. *Higasinihon daishinsai: Soka Gakkai ha dou ugoitaka* [Great East Japan Earthquake: What did the Soka Gakkai do?], Tokyo: Ushio Shuppansha, 2011.

[4] Transcript of papal Q&A on Italian TV, 22 Apr. 2011. [online] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/transcript-papal-qa-italian-tv [Accessed 1 April 2016]

[5] Gray Stern, *Can God Intervene?: How Religion Explains Natural Disasters*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007.

[6] In 2015, there are about 2,950,000 Christians in Japan.

[7] Alubomulle Sumanasara. Higashinihon daisinsai de hisai sareta minasama he (To everyone that has been affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake). 2011.3.18. [online] http://gotami.j-theravada.net/2011/03/post-247.html [Accessed 1 April 2016]

Author Biography

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