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Author

Ngo, Hoa Francisco

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The Sacred and the Secular: Catholic Missionary Work in the Land of the Rising Sun

Hoa Francisco Ngo | Anthropology | Session 4A
Mentor: Professor Charles Hirschkind, Anthropology

In Japan, I met a young business man by the name of Hikaru. In his late 20s, Hikaru was fairly young bachelor living at Seido, an Opus Dei center in Ashiya, Japan. He told me about the time he was forced to come-out Catholic at work. Whenever the company he used to work for had international clients, the company's business teams would treat the clients to a trip to a city's red lantern district as a way to foster relationships between the groups. These trips included going to risqué hangouts where the businessmen spoke to one another about future transactions while in the company of young women. Being a practicing Catholic, Hikaru felt a bit uncomfortable participating in these kinds of activities, so he approached the team manager. He told the manager that he was Catholic and that he did not want to do these business practices, fully accepting any consequences which included possibly being fired. The manager did not fire him and let him abstain from having to participate in going to the red lantern districts with clients. Word quickly spread about Hikaru's Catholicism though, and soon the company began referring to him by Paul, his confirmation name, as a lighthearted joke. After Hikaru went public with his religion, a couple of other co-workers revealed that they too, were Christian and the company president later admitted that he was Catholic as well.

Being openly religious in Japan often marks the person with a suspicion of being a cult member, a stigma formed by the historical development of "religion" (*shūkyō*) as well as "secular" in the country. "Religion" in Japan groups together communities such as Buddhist schools, Shinto, Christian denominations, Islam, and "new religions" (*shinshūkyō*), which may have little to do with one another, and yet share an abstract bond by virtue of being a "religion." Understood as a private matter chosen by an individual to believe, religion is seldom talked about outside of religious circles. Secularism is not a benign arbiter which allows the coexistence of religious and non-religious, but molds and regulates certain practices and beliefs to promote a specific type of subject under the State. Japanese secularism is a political ideology which banishes practices which pose a threat to State power as well as a certain image of the Japanese public. My research explores how the Japanese government defines and regulates religious institutions, with an ethnographic focus at Seido, an Opus Dei center in Ashiya, with how they go about doing missionary activities. Crossing certain lines will get a religious group condemned as a cult by the populace and justify State intervention. While I find a surplus of literature on Asian religions, there is a dearth on the topic of secularism which is quite surprising with countries such as China and Vietnam being so direct in regulating religion. I hope to help fill this intellectual gap with my research.

So why was Hikaru admitting he was a Catholic such a big deal? By law, one has freedom of religion on grounds of Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution. But as I mentioned earlier, "religion" tends to group unlikely associated communities together, for the sake of being able to regulate said groups. The social stigma attached with being openly religious greatly intensified after the Sarin gas affair in 1995 by a "new religion" of the name Aum Shinrikyo (

). The group had set up and detonated Sarin gas bombs in a Tokyo subway, creating panic and heavy aversion to anyone or group which took their religion seriously. Anyone who did take their religion seriously was associated to be involved with a cult, especially any follower of a *shinshūkyō*. This affair prompted the government to reevaluate all religious bodies in Japan, instigating the Religious Corporation Act (*shūkyō hō jin hō*). For a religious institution to legally exist it must have some committee or body which can function like a corporation, with a board of directors and an extensive inventory list including highly scrutinized monetary records on top of all other regulations and checks to what a proper religious institution would look like.

In order to avoid the legal and social drama, Seido classified itself as a secular institution. While it is an Opus Dei center, “Seido” is the legal entity, publically known as an international language school and residence (Ashiya only). Its inhabitants are comprised of numeraries and supernumeraries: laymen (meaning not clergy) who express their faith in a type of professionalism. A numerary is a single man or woman who has a job and has devoted themselves fully to Opus Dei, meaning they will not get married and will help financially support Opus Dei in exchange for food and housing along with constant access to the Sacraments. A supernumerary is a man or a woman who intends to or already is married but is still affiliated with Opus Dei, though they don’t necessarily provide financial aid to Opus Dei centers since they usually have a family to support. There are also numeraries who choose to become priests of Opus Dei. At Seido, there are 8 numeraries, 2 of which are priests, 1 supernumary, and another Catholic resident who is not part of Opus Dei.

The members are careful in treading the lines between what is considered secularly appropriate and what is religious because crossing these lines will have them marked as being involved with cultish activities. This stigma has led to some cognitive dissonance, as explained by one of the administrative staff at Seido’s language school. He says that the Japanese Catholics behave just like everyone else in Japan, which is problematic because they’re “supposed to be different; they’re supposed to behave like Catholics.” While he accepts the division of public and private in Japan he also sees it as a barrier to living an authentic Catholic life if Catholics are indistinguishable from anyone else.

This begs the question of what it means to live an authentic Catholic life in Japan. First, I should explain that to Seido, geography should not change the teachings of the Church. By teachings, they refer to the official Church positions written in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which in itself had a lot of drama in translating to Japanese. Seido members often talk about a lack of missionary spirit in Japanese Catholics; the regular parishioners show up to mass on Sunday and commune with one another, but do not have a notion of spreading the faith. Seido is in contrast to the larger Catholic community in Japan because while they too are laymen, they acknowledge a duty of bringing others to the Church, though they go about that unconventionally (which I will get to later on). Another thing Seido sees necessary in an authentic Catholic life is a prioritization of God; that is to say, the laity rarely prioritizes God. According to Seido’s director, many children who are raised Catholic fall away from the faith as school life becomes more intense, substituting mass attendance for cram school (*juku*,) and eventually phasing out their faith. Activities which promote or help cultivate an economically successful person are prioritized in Japan, while private, “non-essential” matters such as religion are left, theoretically, to the individual. Coupled with having no desire to spread Catholicism,

Seido sees the Church in Japan in a state of decline because the Japanese Catholics are not fully embracing an identity of being Catholic and instead practicing it within a private space.

Japanese secularism creates a tension between living in a certain Japanese public, which demands a particular conduct, and living a certain Catholic life, which often runs contrary to what the expected behavior of how a modern Japanese citizen should act. It looks as though Seido members divide themselves to a religious practitioner while in the privacy of their homes and then adopts a secular work ethic while in the public sphere; otherwise, they are condemned as a cult member. The members reconcile these two expectations by blending their religious life into their work through the Opus Dei concept of “sanctification of everyday work.” While maintaining a secular facade, Seido members turn their daily, secular work (if they are not priests) into moments of religious devotion, which lessens the distance they are expected to maintain in their public lives from their religious ones.

Because Japanese secularism defines “religion” as a private affiliation, Seido conversion and proselytizing activities actually usually avoid religious motives. Proselytization is not an activity Seido says it engages in, and a word I would not use to describe their efforts to convert. Instead of “proselytize,” they use the word “apostolate” referring to the actions of the Apostles. Having an understanding that religion is a private matter, apostolate work comes in the form of friendship. Apostolate work is also not just for the non-Catholics, but for Catholics and even members of Opus Dei as well. Instead of directly engaging anyone in talks of theology or philosophy, Seido members generally go about their conversations without any concrete agenda of pursuing the other party to convert or to be a better Catholic. They talk about matters such as the World Cup, what people’s days were like, how their gardening is going, and matters like that. There are occasions when a non-Catholic is interested in a Catholic topic, which then prompts a religious conversation but the conversation’s end goal is not to convince the non-Catholic that they need to be Catholic, but rather, in their words, “to share the joy and love of Christ.” Public engagements are considered ill-effective and often times uncharitable, damaging one’s own character more than helping the other grow closer to God, therefore friendships as a space to share personal details such as religion are preferred.

Because “religion” in Japan groups together organizations which were perceived as public threats, all religious groups which blur public and private divisions could be seen as a cult in disguise. This stigma has translated to different approaches in how Seido members present themselves at work and how they attempt to spread Catholicism. My question involving the government understanding and regulating religious institutions is a large endeavor, and my own work only provided a small slice of the multitude of stories involving religion in Japan. While I focused on the Seido Opus Dei center, the rest of the Catholic Church in Japan operates on different grounds. Further research will have to explore other religious groups, Catholic or not, in order to get a more complete sense of what is going on in Japan in terms of the Secular.

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