

Chapter 27

Disaster and Religion

Field of expertise: Religious Studies

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Summary

In the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, many people suffered from grief and survivor's guilt. In order to provide spiritual support, we thought about making use of religious leaders who could be described as being experts on death and the afterlife. In the midst of difficulties such as resistance to religion and the separation of church and state, Tohoku University has explored the possibility of religious people supporting disaster victims by proposing a new image of clinical religious leaders and realizing a training program for them.

Keywords: death, memorial, folk religion, spiritual care, Interfaith Chaplain

Introduction

How do you feel about religious groups and people supporting those affected in disaster areas? Many people may feel that they do not like religions because they are scary, or that followers of that faith may proselytize or brainwash others. However, in the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, especially in the areas severely damaged by the tsunami, many people have experienced loss of loved ones. Grief and survivor's guilt are tormenting them. In these areas, there is room for religious practitioners who are backed by religious traditions that have accumulated wisdom over centuries of thinking about the meaning of life and death. Tohoku University has developed a new model for religious leaders called "interfaith chaplain (Rinsho-Shukyoshi)," and has established a training program for them, in order to create a framework in which religious leaders can reach out to those affected in disaster areas.

1: Problems Revealed by the Great East Japan Earthquake

What happened?

The Great East Japan Earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011 claimed the lives of nearly 20,000 people, including dead and missing people. In particular, many in the tsunami-affected areas experienced the sudden loss of family members who they last saw cheerfully going to work or school that morning, colleagues who they had been working alongside, and friends who

they had just had tea with the day before. In cases like these, where a small difference in judgment or chance was the difference between life and death, there are many cases of survivor's guilt. This has highlighted the need for emotional care to alleviate stress in the survivors.

The earthquake also impacted the funerary system. In particular, many temples and cemeteries in the tsunami-affected areas were damaged, and crematoriums stopped operating due to fuel shortages. Some local governments, struggling to handle the bodies of victims, conducted temporary burials without cremation. Even if cremation was possible, it was difficult to hold a normal funeral in the tsunami-affected areas. The fact that the bereaved families were not able to send off their dead properly was also a great stress to them.

The reality of the damage

The traditional way of dealing with death and funerary issues in Japan was for religious people, such as Buddhist monks, to act as experts. In Miyagi Prefecture alone, 41 Buddhist temples of the Soto Zen sect were completely destroyed, 69 temples were partially destroyed, and 6 priests died (as of March 31, 2014). (The official website of the Soto Zen sect, Soto Zen Net Damaged Temples list, in Japanese: <https://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/teqw-hisai-higashi>). According to the Jinja Honcho, 68 Shinto shrines in Miyagi Prefecture were completely destroyed, 86 were partially destroyed, and 4 priests died (as of July 15, 2011). This left an extremely large number of bereaved families without adequate funeral services or anyone to consult, and with a great deal of emotional anxiety.

2: Paradigms Destroyed by the Earthquake

Difficulties for religious leaders to provide support in the disaster area

In Japan before the Great East Japan Earthquake, there was strong resistance to religious people working in disaster areas, and it was almost taboo to provide emotional care to the victims. After the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, which is said to be the first year of volunteerism, various NGOs and other organizations played an active role in disaster relief and reconstruction, and various religious organizations also sent many volunteers to the disaster areas. However, it is reported that it was difficult to overcome the distrust of the government and local residents who were afraid of being proselytized, and they had no choice but to hide their identities and engage in the same activities as ordinary volunteers. Since the latter half of the 20th century, the world's religions have been increasingly interested in social contribution activities that go beyond servicing their own followers. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) of various religious backgrounds have formed to help people and societies suffering from poverty, discrimination, disaster, and conflict. Similar momentum was rising in the Japanese religious communities to participate in social movements, but the case of the Great Hanshin Earthquake highlighted the difficulty of social contribution activities of religion in Japan.

Japanese people's dislike of religion

One of the major barriers to religious support for disaster victims is an almost allergic response to religion among many Japanese people. According to a well-known survey conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun in 2008 (Yomiuri Shimbun Annual Survey of Japanese People 6: Views on Religion), only 26.1% of respondents answered "Yes" to the question, "Do you believe in religion?" The percentage of people who answered "No" to this question was 71.9%. When asked, "Do you

think that religion is important for leading a happy life?" 36.6% said "Yes," and 59.1% said "No". Not only that, but many Japanese people even have a sense of fear and dislike toward religion, which may be partly due to the Aum Shinrikyo incident in 1995.

The world of folk beliefs

This does not mean that Japanese people are indifferent to the dead or invisible beings. In the same survey, the percentage of respondents who answered "Yes" to being asked if they often pray before a Buddhist temple or Shinto altar at home, make a New Year's visit to the shrine, or visit the family grave during the Bon Festival or other seasonal rites, was 56.7%, 73.1%, and 78.3% respectively. From this, we can see that the habit of showing respect to and trusting invisible beings such as the dead or gods, persists among citizens. The problem is that these customs belong to the realm of folk beliefs, which are deeply related to the teachings of each religion but are considered to be somewhat off-center. For example, a Buddhist altar is an altar for worshipping Buddhas and Bodhisattvas according to Buddhist doctrine, but many Japanese people use it as a way to worship ancestors. In providing support to the disaster-stricken areas, religious leaders need to take this difference into account and refrain from imposing the orthodox teachings of their own denomination.

The principle of separating church and state

The principle of separation of church and state is another reason why it is difficult for religious leaders to get involved in disaster relief. In particular, there were many cases where local governments were hesitant to provide funds or information to specific religions, making it difficult for religions to participate in disaster relief. There was also a tendency for religious groups to be restrained from entering evacuation centers and temporary housing because they were suspected of proselytizing. In fact, after the Great East Japan Earthquake, there were religious groups that were involved in missionary activities at evacuation centers, and this is a problem that continues to haunt religious groups when they try to provide relief to disaster-stricken areas.

3: A New Approach

Interfaith Chaplaincy (Rinsho-Shukyoshi)

The Tohoku University method, which trains Interfaith Chaplains, is a new way of being a religious teacher that was created after the Great East Japan Earthquake in order to solve the above-mentioned problems and realize support for disaster victims. In Miyagi Prefecture, after the earthquake, a non-denominational "Counseling Room for Heart" was established to provide support for disaster victims through cooperation among volunteers from various religions, including Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, and new religions. It developed a variety of activities in cooperation with governments and other NGOs, and received good feedback. This experience gave birth to the idea of training religious professionals who can provide emotional care to disaster victims in public places in cooperation with other religions, governments, NGOs, etc., without proselytizing. In April 2012, the Graduate School of Arts and Letters established the Endowed Chair of Practical Religion, partly because the Religious Studies Department had been the secretariat of the Counseling Room for Heart, and it has been implementing a program to train practitioners from

various religions. In 2018, the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan began a certification system for Interfaith Chaplain.

The difference from a chaplain

A major feature of an Interfaith Chaplain (Rinsho-Shukyoshi) is that they do not engage in evangelism and do not impose the doctrine of their religion. The purpose is to listen. In Europe and the U.S., chaplains are assigned to hospitals, schools, and the military to provide emotional care from a religious perspective, but in such cases, the care is based on the assumption that the patient shares a particular religion, such as Christianity, and relies on the doctrine of that religion. On the other hand, Interfaith Chaplain in Japan can be said to have adapted to the culture, where the view of life and death is deeply connected to the realm of folk beliefs. As for the relationship with the government, the fact that various religions cooperate with each other and do not aim to proselytize has been praised, and cooperation in various fields, which was not considered before, is progressing.

4: Achievements and the Future

The spread of clinical religious teachers

Using Tohoku University's certificate program, the training program for Interfaith Chaplain at Tohoku University was reorganized into two programs in 2017: Liberal Arts Course and Practical Course. By the end of fiscal year 2019, 213 people had completed the training program, 118 of whom were certified as Interfaith Chaplain by the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan. At present, 9 universities in Japan, including Sophia University, Ryukoku University, and Aichi Gakuin University, are training Interfaith Chaplain. As of June 2020, nearly 20 hospitals, including public hospitals such as Tohoku University Hospital, are employing Interfaith Chaplains who completed the program.

Conclusion - from the author

In the future, it will probably be difficult to avoid the loss of life from large-scale disasters such as the Great East Japan Earthquake. Religious traditions can be difficult to manage, but they certainly have the advantage of having thought about death for a long time. It is important to utilize them as one of the many resources to build a disaster-resistant society.

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