



The Real Position of Japan toward Christianity Hirai Kinzō (1893)

Hirai Kinzō was a Rinzai Zen intellectual in Meiji-era Japan. He contributed to a revival of Japanese Buddhism that began in the 1880s, following a period of government hostility toward Buddhism that had accompanied the Meiji Restoration. In the early 1890s, Hirai lectured in the United States for the Theosophical Society, founded by white American and Buddhist convert Henry Steel Olcott.

During his American lecture tour, Hirai gave two speeches at the World's Parliament of Religions, a pioneering multifaith conference held in Chicago in 1893 to showcase religions from around the world. In one of those speeches, excerpted here, Hirai appealed to Christian morality to argue for the injustice of the 1858 treaties that had opened Japan to merchants from the United States and other Western powers. He also denounced prejudice against Japanese immigrants living in the United States. Newspapers reported that the speech was sympathetically received by Hirai's mostly white American audience. Audience members shouted "Shame!" to voice their disapproval of injustices Hirai described, and he was applauded enthusiastically at the speech's conclusion.

[I]t is a fact that from the beginning of our history, Japan has received all teachings with open mind, and also that the instructions which came from outside have commingled with the native religion with entire harmony—as is seen by so many temples built, in the name of truth, with a mixed appellation of Buddhism and Shintoism; as is seen by the affinity among the teachers of Confucianism and Taoism, or other -isms, and the Buddhist and Shinto priests; as is seen by an individual Japanese who pays his or her respects to all teachings mentioned above; as is seen by the peculiar construction of the Japanese houses, which have generally two rooms, one for a miniature Buddhist temple and the other for a small Shinto shrine, before which the family study the respective scriptures of the two religions; as is seen by the popular ode [...], “Though there are many roads at the foot of the mountain, yet, if the top is reached, the same moon is seen” [...]

But you will protest and say: “Why, then, is Christianity not so warmly accepted by your nation as other religions?” This is the point which I wish especially to present before you.

There are two causes why Christianity is not so cordially received. This great religion was widely spread in my country; but in 1637, the Christian missionaries, combined with the converts, caused a tragic and bloody rebellion against the country, and it is understood that those missionaries intended to subjugate Japan to their own mother country. This shocked all Japan, and it took the government of the Shogun a year to suppress this terrible and intrusive commotion.

[...T]his incident has passed, and we may forget it. Yet it is not entirely unreasonable that the terrified suspicion—or, you may say, superstition—that Christianity is the instrument of depredation is [...] aroused in the Oriental mind, when it is an admitted fact that some of the powerful nations of Christendom are gradually encroaching upon the Orient [...]

Since 1853, when Commodore Perry came to Japan as the ambassador of the President of the United States of America, our country began to be better known by all Western nations, and the

new ports were widely opened, and the prohibition of the gospel was abolished, as it was before the Christian rebellion. By the convention at Edo, now Tokyo, in 1858, the treaty was stipulated between America and Japan and also with the European powers. It was the time when our country was yet under the feudal government; and on account of our having had but little intercourse with other nations for over two centuries since the Christian rebellion of 1637, diplomacy was quite a new experience to the feudal officers, who put their full confidence upon Western nations and, without any alteration, accepted every article of the treaty presented from the foreign governments. According to this treaty, we are in a very disadvantageous situation; and amongst the others, there are two prominent articles which deprive us of our rights and advantages. One is the exterritoriality of Western nations in Japan, by which all cases [...] arising between the subjects of the Western nations in my country [...] and the Japanese shall be subject to the jurisdiction of the authorities of the Western nations. Another regards the tariff, which [...] we have no right to impose where it might properly be done. [...]

Would not the people of America and Europe think that they were trampled upon, and their rights ignored, if they were denied the application of their judicial power over those cases which occur at home? Would not the Western nations be indignant and consider that they were deprived of independence if they were compelled to renounce their rightful custom duty? I read in the Western books and papers all sorts of treatises regarding human rights and the rights of state [...] I observe numerous churches of Christianity and their members, together with the rest of the nation, who are sincerely looking toward the advancement of human good. While I admire this placing of so much importance on these topics, I do not understand why the Christian lands have ignored the rights and advantages of forty million souls of Japan for forty years since the stipulation of the treaty.

One of the excuses offered by foreign nations is that our country is not yet civilized. Is it the principle of civilized law that the rights and profits of the so-called uncivilized, or the weaker, should be sacrificed? [...] Another kind of apology comes from the religious source, and the claim is made that the Japanese are idolaters and heathen. [...] But [...] is it Christian morality to trample upon the rights and advantages of a non-Christian nation, coloring all their natural happiness with the dark stain of injustice? [...]

You send your missionaries to Japan, and they advise us to be moral and believe Christianity. We like to be moral, we know that Christianity is good, and we are very thankful for this kindness. But at the same time, our people are rather perplexed and very much in doubt about their advice. For when we think that the treaty stipulated in the time of feudalism, when we were yet in our youth, is still clung to by the powerful nations of Christendom; [...] when legal cases are always decided by the foreign authorities in Japan unfavorably to us; when, some years ago, a Japanese was not allowed to enter a university on the Pacific coast of America because of his being of a different race; when, a few months ago, the school board in San Francisco enacted a regulation that no Japanese should be allowed to enter the public schools there; when, last year, the Japanese were driven out in wholesale from one of the territories of the United States; [...] when there are many men who go in processions hoisting lanterns marked "Japs must go"; when the Japanese in the Hawaiian Islands are deprived of their suffrage; when we see some Western people in Japan who erect before the entrance of their houses a special post upon which is the notice, "No Japanese is allowed to enter here," just like a board upon which is written, "No dogs

allowed"; when we are in such a situation, it will not be unreasonable—notwithstanding the kindness of the Western nations, from one point of view, who send their missionaries to us—that we unintelligent heathens are embarrassed and hesitate to swallow the sweet and warm liquid of the heaven of Christianity. If such be the Christian ethics—well, we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen. [...]

We are very often called barbarians, and I have heard and read that the Japanese are stubborn and cannot understand the truth of the Bible. I will admit that this is true in some sense; for though they admire the eloquence of the orator and wonder at his courage, though they approve his logical argument, yet they are very stubborn and will not join Christianity as long as they think that it is Western morality to preach one thing and practice another.

But I know this is not the morality of the civilized West, and I have the firm belief in the highest humanity and noblest generosity of the Occidental nations toward us. Especially as to the American nation, I know their sympathy and integrity. I know their sympathy by their emancipation of the colored people from slavery. I know their integrity by the patriotic spirit which established the independence of the United States of America. And I feel sure that the circumstances which made the American people declare independence are in some sense comparable to the present state of my country. I cannot restrain my thrilling emotion and sympathetic tears whenever I read in the Declaration of Independence the passages:

[Hirai quotes at some length from the Declaration of Independence, starting with "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." and ending with "...constrains them to alter their former systems of government."]

You, citizens of this glorious, free United States, who, when the right time came, struck for "liberty or death"; you, who waded through blood that you might fasten to the mast your banner of the stripes and stars upon the land and sea; you, who enjoy the fruition of liberty through your struggle for it—you, I say, may understand somewhat our position, and as you asked for justice from your mother country, we too ask justice from these foreign powers.

If any religion teaches injustice to humanity, I will oppose it, as I ever have opposed it, with my blood and soul. I will be the bitterest dissenter from Christianity, or I will be the warmest admirer of its Gospels. [...] We, the forty million souls of Japan, standing firmly and persistently upon the basis of international justice, await still further manifestations as to the morality of Christianity.

Source: Kinza Riuge M. Hirai, “The Real Position of Japan toward Christianity,” in *The World’s Parliament of Religions...*, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 1:444-450, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3316177>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Compared to Kinza Ringe M. Harai, “The Real Position of Japan toward Christianity,” in *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions* [...], ed. Walter R. Houghton (Chicago: Frank Tennyson Neely, 1893), 157-161, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cool.ark:/13960/t6m04pp2r>. Public domain.

In the official proceedings of the World’s Parliament of Religions, edited by Barrows, speakers’ addresses often appear in condensed form; however, comparison to the Neely’s edition suggests that Barrows published Hirai’s address in its entirety. Neely’s text, which was based on a stenographer’s transcript made while Hirai delivered the address, is shorter, missing three paragraphs’ worth of material found in Barrows.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Some variants from the Neely’s edition have been incorporated where they read more naturally or clearly than the Barrows edition. A phrase relocated within a long sentence for improved readability. The Japanese place name that Barrows renders as *Yedo*, and Neely’s as *Yeddo*, has been modernized here to *Edo* to aid recognition. An initial hyphen added to the word *-isms*. Other punctuation emended in line with modern conventions for readability. *Western* is capitalized here as per Neely’s; Barrows does not capitalize that word, although he does capitalize *West* and *Occidental*.

These edited excerpts from Hirai’s address are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the sources listed above.



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