

An Introduction to Imaoka Shin'ichirō (1881-1988)

Free Religion and the Tokyo Kiitsu Kyōkai

—o0o—

The Position of a Free Religious Person (自由宗教人) (1951)

Religion is a matter of individual experience, as emphasised by Shinran Shonin when he said, “Amida’s salvation is for oneself alone.” It is highly personal in nature. However, the more thoroughly an individual delves into their personal religious experience, the more it becomes a social matter as well. The attitude of Bodhisattva Dharmakara (法藏菩薩 *Hōzō Bosatsu*), who stated, “Until all sentient beings are saved, I will not attain salvation for myself. I will be saved together with all others, not going ahead of them,” is just as valid as Shinran Shonin’s. These two seem contradictory at first glance but are, in fact, the two sides of the same religious life. To realise the free expression of this religious life, one must maintain a stance that is uniquely individual yet universally comprehensive—the position of a free religious person 自由宗教人 *Jiyū Shūkyō-jin*). If someone were to argue, “Isn’t this the same position taken by all religious individuals, not just free religious people?” I would wholeheartedly agree. There is no position for free religious people that exists apart from the true position of all religious individuals. The position of a true religious person, who is not constrained by anything, is indeed the position of a free religion person. I would respond, “Free religion actually means religion itself.”

Based on the principles mentioned above, if we concretely implement the position of a free religious person, firstly, a free religious church must be a democratic institution that equally respects individuals and groups. In other words, the church should belong not to religious professionals (clergy, pastors, etc.) but to the general church members (laypeople 一般教会員). In this context, the sovereignty of the church should be shared among all church members, and clergy and pastors would be considered executive authorities. The same principle should apply to the position of the founder. Shinran Shonin’s attitude, stating, “Shinran has no disciples. All are fellow travellers (同行), friends,” is genuine. If fellow members become truly close, intimately interconnected, then the founder and officials can fade into the background. It is even conceivable that the church can function without a founder or officials. The truly great founder and officials are those who provide inspiration and guidance beyond their “on-stage” activities. Consequently, the interactions and mutual growth among the members become more important than the sermons and activities of the officials. Both aspects hold equal value.

The free religious church is said to have no set creeds, but even though a free religious person seeks freedom, it is impossible for them to have no intellectual expression of their beliefs. On the contrary, it is natural and free for individuals to have various beliefs. Thus, free religious people may even possess more beliefs than those adhering to established religions. However, these beliefs are private and individual, never to be used as an instrument of coercion by external religious authorities. Free religious people would never accept dogmas like the Apostles’, Nicene, or Athanasian Creeds as immutable truths, unable to add or subtract a single word. The assertion that free religious people have no creeds means that they do not reject all beliefs but rather recognize that beliefs are personal and diverse, evolving with individuals and through time, expressing only a part of the truth, not its entirety. Despite their partial nature, these expressions of truth should resonate with and evoke empathy from others who hold sincere beliefs. However, when it comes to

organising a congregation, it is undoubtedly essential to have some kind of manifesto (綱領) that clarifies the basis for the congregation's unity. However, this manifesto should not be a statement of specific beliefs but rather a declaration of shared purposes or guidelines for practice (実践要綱).

In terms of rituals, the same principle applies. Free religious people may not have rituals that declare salvation is achieved through baptism or chanting sutras. However, religious beliefs do not exist in their own right, but are always embodied in some form. Just as there is no mind without matter, and no life without a body, there is no religion without rituals. However, since material things and forms vary widely and are never uniform, religious rituals also differ widely, and it seems as if there is no point of convergence. In fact, there are examples where differences in rituals have been the cause of divisions between sects. Therefore, when free religious people gather to conduct a worship service, the question arises as to what kind of ritual should be adopted. At first glance, this seems to be an extremely difficult problem, but from the basic standpoint held by free religious people, it can be resolved quite easily.

The religion of a free religious person is a universal religion (普遍的宗教), and since it is a religion that applies to all people under heaven, it should not be the case that, due to rituals, it does not resonate with certain kinds of people. If that were the case, then that free religion could no longer be called a universal religion. If it truly possesses universal life, then naturally it should have enough appeal to evoke empathy even in people accustomed to different rituals, transcending the differences in rituals, shouldn't it?"

If it truly possesses universal life (遍的生命), it should naturally have enough appeal to inspire empathy that transcends differences in rituals, even for those accustomed to different forms of rituals. Isn't it in transcending differences in rituals and doctrines and finding mutual sympathy and resonance that the "communion of saints" (聖徒の交り), or the gathering of holy beings 聖衆俱会), which is the goal and essence of a free religious individual's church, is found? Therefore, the rituals adopted in the worship service of a free religious individual's church do not need to be anything specific. What is essential is not the issue of rituals but the pulsation of the universal great life (普遍の大生命) that moves and inspires even those accustomed to different rituals. However, if someone insists that this pulsation of universal great life can only be evoked through a particular ritual (and not some other ritual), I would begin to question the universality of the religion held by such people.

Lastly, I believe that clarifying the similarities and differences between a church of free religious people (自由宗教人教会), a Free Religion Church, and a Religious Association (宗教連盟) will also help explain the characteristics of free religion. From my perspective, both groups are similar in that they advocate for friendly relations between different religions. However, while the Religious Association is a collaboration concerned with the secondary aspects of various religions, a Free Religion Church is a union in the essence of these religions. Consequently, it is difficult to conduct worship within a Religious Association, but in a Free Religion Church, worship can (and rather must) be conducted. This is the point of difference between the two. The Religious Federation remains a liaison organisation, while the Free Religion Church is an independent and autonomous church. So then, what is the relationship between established churches (既成教会) and the Free Religion Church? Does one have to resign from their established church in order to become a member of the Free Religion Church, or is it permissible to belong to both churches simultaneously? In other words, the question arises: Is the Free Religion Church a single sect, or does it transcend sects? My answer to this question is both yes and no. If an established church is not exclusive and grasps the universal religious life through the symbol of a sect, then that

established church is already, in essence, a Free Religion Church. In such cases, one can belong to either church, and as long as one has the energy, they may even belong to both churches at the same time. However, in many cases, existing established churches are exclusive in the sense of being sectarian, and for that reason, there is a great need to newly establish a Free Religion Church that transcends these existing churches. Thus, it is natural and necessary to cut ties with established churches and dedicate oneself fully to nurturing the Free Religion Church. Therefore, even if the intention is non-sectarian (超宗派的), once the Free Religion Church is formed, it is no longer strictly non-sectarian in the true sense; it becomes a new sect. However, rather than reverting to the old exclusive and self-righteous form of so-called sects, by always adopting a progressive and developmental form in response to the times, it will become a sect that aims for the best possible growth of the universal religious life (普遍的宗教的生命). In other words, it will become a non-sectarian sect.

The above argument is by no means our original idea. Already at the end of the 18th century, Lessing, in his dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise*, depicted the position of a person of free religion very well. Therefore, I would like to conclude this paper by quoting a scene from that drama.

It takes place during the time of the Crusades. Nathan, a Jew, lost seven of his sons, who were killed by the Christian Crusaders. Yet, at that time, a certain stable boy brought Nathan the infant child of his Christian master, seeking Nathan's help. The child's mother had already died, and the father had gone off with the Crusaders, leaving no one to care for the baby. Nathan, overjoyed, accepted the child as if one of his seven slain sons had returned and he raised the child nobly in the Jewish faith. However, eighteen years later, the matter was discovered. The Christian abbot of a monastery, enraged that a Christian child had been raised by a Jew, claimed that Nathan must be burned at the stake and ordered his monks to search for Nathan's whereabouts. The monk given this task was, by coincidence, the same stable boy from all those years ago, and he immediately went to Nathan and said the following:

“This child needs love more than anything else—more than Christianity. Even the love of a wild animal would suffice. He can always become a Christian later. (If it hadn't been for your compassion, that child would have surely died.) You, a Jew, are the true Christian. I've never known a Christian as noble as you.”

To this, Nathan responded:

"We are both blessed. What makes you see me as a Christian in your eyes, makes me see you as a Jew in mine.”

The essence of religion is greater and more sacred than Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Shinto, creeds, rituals, or sects. It is the universal life (which we may call love, perhaps) that transcends all of these. A free religious person is solely dedicated to the free expansion of that universal life.

(From “Creation,” Issue 12, Showa 26, 1951 — draft trans. by Andrew J. Brown)

—o0o—

My Position on Free Religion (自由宗教) (1952 NHK Broadcast)

Since I was raised in a devout Shinshu Buddhist family, I was a Buddhist during my childhood. Later, during my later years in middle school, under the guidance of a British government-employed teacher (英国官教師), I was baptized in the Anglican Church (聖公会) and became a

Christian. This happened around the year Meiji 30 (1897), and for my parents, the fact that a Christian (ヤソ教 Yaso) believer emerged from a Shinshu Buddhist family was like drinking a cup of poison and worse than having produced a national traitor. I myself felt as if my heart were being torn apart. However, I could not bring myself to abandon Christianity and went on to live as an devoted Christian throughout high school and university.

After graduating from university, I immediately became a pastor at a certain Congregationalist church in Kobe. However, during my three years of pastoral life, what I keenly felt was how unreasonable it was to encourage Buddhists and Shintoists to convert to Christianity. I came to the conclusion that true evangelism to Buddhists and Shintoists is not about making them abandon Buddhism or Shinto, but rather encouraging them to become true Buddhists or true Shintoists. In other words, I could no longer, in good conscience, engage in the traditional Christian form of evangelism, so I resigned from being a pastor. I then became an assistant in the Religious Studies Department at Tokyo University, after which I studied for two years at Harvard Divinity School.

Upon returning to Japan, I taught courses in religious studies and the history of Christianity at Nihon University for more than ten years while also working as a middle school principal and researching the essence and methods of religious education in schools. Additionally, from Showa 7 (1932) to Showa 15 (1940), I traveled throughout Japan with Mr. Mason, an American scholar of Shinto, visiting various shrines and Shintoists, immersing myself in the study of Shinto. In this way, my religious stance gradually shifted away from Christianity. However, I did not feel comfortable identifying myself as either a Buddhist or a Shintoist. At the same time, I felt that I could say I was both a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Shintoist. But the most accurate expression for me is that, after fifty years of religious pilgrimage, the final destination I arrived at was free religion. This is why, a few years ago, I started the free religion movement together with like-minded individuals. So, what is this free religion stance? I would like to offer a few humble thoughts on this point and invite your critique.

I believe that free religion has two central principles. The first is the respect for freedom or individuality. In other words, it is a religion that is not bound by anything, a truly personal religion that has become part of one's own life. To put it in the strictest and most simple way, it is a religion not bound by creeds (仰箇条). Creeds as intellectual expressions of religious experience are, of course, valuable. However, they are not religion itself. Although creeds may hold significant historical importance at the time of their establishment, they are not eternal, unchanging truths. As times progress, creeds must also be altered. It is precisely religion that allows for the transformation of creeds. Therefore, free religion first advocates for liberation from creeds. However, this does not mean rejecting personal principles (which, strictly speaking, are not creeds) or even the bylaws of churches or denominations that have been created for sake of expediency, nor does it aim to bind others to such things.

Next, free religion is a natural consequence of the insistence that religion must not be borrowed, that it must be one's own religion, and that the presence of monks and pastors is secondary in our religious life. If anything, our religious movement should take the form of a layperson's movement (平徒運動). Accordingly, whether temples or churches, they should not belong to monks or pastors, but to lay-people (平徒) in general.

Next, free religion is also liberated from founders. Buddhism and Christianity revere Shakyamuni or Christ as founders. However, in free religion, there are no founders. This does not mean, in some egotistical sense, that we ignore or disdain Shakyamuni or Christ. It simply means that we do not depend on or cling to any specific founder. Therefore, we respect not only Shakyamuni and Christ

but all the sages and wise teachers from both East and West, ancient and modern, and learn from their teachings. However, some may criticize this by saying that such an approach makes it unclear whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam. That may very well be the case. The characteristic of free religion is precisely that it is unclear whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam. I find the very notion that religion must be either Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Shinto to be strange.

Such a way of thinking is the belief that religion is fine as something “ready-made” (レディーマイド). Even in clothing, ready-made items are often ill-fitting. How much more so when it comes to religion. Religion must be “made-to-order” (メイド・ツー・オーダー) to the utmost. It must perfectly fit each individual’s personality. In the end, it must be your own personal religion. In this respect, I find Shinran’s attitude truly exemplary when he said, “If you deeply contemplate the vow of Amida’s Five Kalpas of profound thought, you will realise that it is solely for Shinran alone.”

However, some may question whether free religion, which allows for a wide range of diversity, would lead to confusion and complexity. But the reality is quite the opposite. Having one’s true personal religion, on the contrary, brings people into true cooperation and unity. It also leads to a deeper, broader and more universal faith. This is just like how a truly strong society is built by individuals who have awakened to their own personality. On one hand, respecting freedom and the individual, and on the other, valuing cooperation and society, the principles of democracy are also the principles of free religion. Therefore, free religion does not consider personal salvation and social salvation as separate matters. It does not think of the individual being saved first and then, through the cooperation of those saved individuals, society being saved. Rather, it considers personal salvation and social salvation as simultaneous. In this regard, I find deep meaning in the Catholic teaching that “there is no salvation outside the Church.” I am also deeply interested in the fact that Shrine Shinto is the communal religion of the local community where the shrine is located (Gemeinschaft or community).

But what moves me even more is the Eighteenth Vow of Bodhisattva Dharmakara (法蔵菩薩 *Hōzō Bosatsu*), which stirs infinite emotion within me. Bodhisattva Dharmakara vowed that unless all sentient beings in the ten directions are saved, he himself would not be saved. He does not reach enlightenment and become a Buddha first, and then call out to all people to join him. Instead, he throws himself into the midst of the people, suffers with them, and rejoices with them. When children are starving due to a lack of food, a parent divides their portion and feeds the children first. They would never eat first themselves. A great teacher never looks down on their students or seeks to create disciples. If they create anything, it is individuals greater than themselves. In other words, they willingly enter into the lives of their students and devote themselves to the mutual refinement of character through shared work. In this respect, too, I think Shinran, who said “I have not a single disciple”, is truly admirable. Therefore, I believe that Bodhisattva Dharmakara is not sitting in enlightenment as a Buddha, but is still suffering and struggling alongside all the people of the world, who are agonizing from the pain of war. Is not a bodhisattva who suffers and struggles alongside us more worthy of reverence than a god who has already reached enlightenment? Is it not within the love that suffers and struggles together with the people that salvation and enlightenment are truly found?

As a natural consequence of the assertion that free religion considers personal salvation and social salvation (社会の数と個人の数) as inseparable, it advocates the absolute necessity of the church. This is the second central point of free religion. In other words, free religion resolutely rejects the anti-social, individualistic, self-righteous, non-church attitude (無教会主義) (or indifference towards the church) of intellectuals (インテリ). However, as I mentioned earlier, free religion is

originally a religion of laypeople, so the church it organises does not have the monastic or cloistered character detached from real society, but is a microcosm of actual society (現実の社会の縮図). Or, it is an exemplary model of real society (模範的な現実社会). From the standpoint of free religion, true religious life can only exist within real social life itself. Therefore, we are absolutely opposed to the idea that temples and churches are sacred, but real society is secular. It is religion that sanctifies real society itself. Consequently, from the standpoint of free religion, paradise or heaven, the Pure Land of the West, and the afterlife should not be sought in the hereafter, but should be found within the real social community. In other words, there is no paradise or heaven apart from an ideal communal society (理想的な共同社会) realised in the real world.

Finally, let me say a word about the relationship or differences between free religion and established religion. A free religious person, above all, seeks to have their own religion, but if they are fortunate enough that an established religion generally satisfies their needs, they naturally become a believer of that established religion. It is like when ready-made clothes are sufficient, there is no need to go out of one's way to have new ones made. However, in such cases, a free religious person who is also a member of an established religion respects the freedom of others' faith just as they respect their own, and therefore never asserts the absolute nature of their own established religious position or seeks to reject other religions or sects. I call such people free Buddhists, free Christians, or free Shintoists. These people, while striving for the free development of their established religion, still respect the traditions of the past. However, the majority of free religious people tend to be those who find they can no longer be satisfied by established religions. Even these individuals do not completely disregard the traditions of the past. They find something worthy of respect and inherit it, but they cannot be satisfied with just that, and so they seek to create new traditions. Consequently, while they respect established religions, they also seek to develop their own new position. In short, free religion may exist within established religions, but generally, it tends to move in a direction that transcends them. From a transcendent perspective, it becomes a new religion. However, rather than being one more sect among many, it is a universal religion (普遍的宗教)—one that encompasses all established religions and sects, while simultaneously opening new spiritual horizons.

(September 1952 NHK Broadcast "Creation" — draft trans, Andrew J. Brown)

—o0o—

What kind of church is Kiitsu Kyokai (帰一協会 or 帰一教會)? (1959)

Even though ten years have passed since its establishment, Kiitsu Kyōkai has not yet fully formalised itself as a church. Although it continues to meet on Sundays throughout the year, it has not been very successful. It remains unclear whether there are members or followers, and this vague situation has led to general criticism that the church will probably disappear in time. And as the person in charge, I sincerely feel sorry for this situation. However, before creating an organisation, it was essential thoroughly to examine the nature and essence of what we call "free religion" (自由宗教). The past ten years have been a period of experimentation for this church. However, I do not believe that I have fully grasped the essence of free religion through a decade of seeking and contemplation. I still consider myself as being simply seeker on the path. I am not a shepherd guiding a flock of lost sheep. The experiments must continue, but I believe I have reached a state of mind where I can put my experiments into practice. Thus, I dare to express my own views on free religion and Kiitsu Kyōkai and humbly seek corrections from those more knowledgeable.

Free religion is a religion that thoroughly emphasises freedom. It not only refuses to be bound by fixed dogmas or rituals, but also advocates liberation from religious founders. Therefore, it is neither what is called Buddhism nor what is called Christianity. It emphasises freedom, autonomy, and creativity. It values the process of improvement and development over the idea of reaching a final endpoint.

The religion of Jesus, as well as the religion of Shakyamuni, was not what is called Christianity or what is called Buddhism. The religion of Jesus was not the doctrine of the Trinity (三位一体説) or the theory of atonement (贖罪論) preached by later Christianity, but was simply the gospel of creative love (造的愛の福音). Shakyamuni's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree was not limited to the Four Noble Truths or the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (十二因縁), but was the grasping of Dharma (ダルマ) — the fundamental law of creative evolution (創造的進化) that adapts to circumstances and manifests in countless forms (I think this could even be translated as “humanism” ヒューマニズム). This kind of flexible, non-dogmatic religion is what we call free religion. However, later Christians and Buddhists confined the ever-evolving spiritual life within the boundaries of dogma, ritual, and religious authority. What is important, therefore, is to bring these rigidified, formalized established religions back to their sources and revive them as free and creative life forces. In other words, to make orthodox Christianity or fixed Buddhism into free Christianity or free Buddhism. But if free Christianity and free Buddhism are to be truly “free,” then there is no need to cling to the traditional names of Christianity or Buddhism. I think simply “free religion” is enough. Therefore, we at the Kiitsu Kyōkai believe we have created one example of true free religion.

Since both Jesus and Shakyamuni are great figures of free religion, we must learn much from both saints with a devout and humble attitude. However, there is absolutely no need to limit ourselves to Jesus and Shakyamuni. We should also learn greatly from Augustine, Luther, and Schweitzer, as well as Ryōkan, Shinran, and Gandhi. Although we previously rejected orthodox Christianity (オルソドックス基督教) and fixed Buddhism (固定仏教), if we take a broad historical view and consider them as steps in the process of evolution, I believe there are things to be learned from them as well. From the standpoint that values the process (progress) more than the final destination, I think we should not apply hierarchical distinctions between polytheism (多神論), monotheism (一神論), personal theism (人格神論), impersonal theism (無人格神論) (a form of atheism), and what is called spiritualism (心霊論). Therefore, Kiitsu Kyōkai includes everything—Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and more. However, this does not mean that all religions are unconditionally unified. Noise and harmony must be distinguished. In order for all religions truly to unify, they must refine and improve each other through mutual polishing. Above all, all religions must first become free religions. In other words, the doctrines, rituals, and organisations of religions should not be considered ultimate or absolute but should be understood as secondary and symbolic, shaped by historical and environmental circumstances. Religions must awaken to the fact that what is important lies beyond these dogmas and symbols.

There is a criticism that I often hear, saying that the Kiitsu Kyōkai has no creed, no scriptures, no pastor or abbot, and is too vague to grasp. This is indeed a fair point. However, as the essence of religion (宗教の神髄) lies in grasping the free and unattainable (自由で無得な) great life force of creative evolution (創造的進化の大生命), such things are merely superficial details. However, just because they are superficial details does not mean they are entirely unnecessary, so I think that, in time, this church should also arrange such things. From the standpoint of the Kiitsu Kyōkai, which is free, tolerant, universal, and all-embracing, the Buddhist scriptures, the Bible, the Qur'an, and the Vedas must all be considered scriptures of Kiitsu Kyōkai. Furthermore, the sages of the past, both

from East and West, must all be respected as the founding teachers of Kiitsu Kyōkai. Some might say that there are too many scriptures and too many founding sages, but that is the same as going to a café and thinking that you must eat all the dishes laid out there. No matter how broad-minded Kiitsu Kyōkai may be, it would never force you to overeat. The only thing Kiitsu Kyōkai emphasises is that you do not eat an unbalanced diet (偏食).

(From the January issue of “Creation” 「創造」 magazine, January, Showa 34 [1959], Issue 86 — draft trans, Andrew J. Brown)

For more information please contact:

Andrew James Brown
Cambridge, UK
caute.brown@gmail.com

Blog—Caute

<http://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com>

Podcast—Making Footprints Not Blueprints

<https://footprints.buzzsprout.com>

Jiyū Shūkyō / Free Religion

<https://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/p/free-religion.html>

Kiitsu Kyōkai

<https://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/p/kiitsu-kyokai.html>

Seiza Meditation (Quiet Sitting)

<https://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/p/seiza-meditation.html>