Kanzo Uchimura

From New World Encyclopedia

Uchimura Kanzō, 内村鑑三, (March 26, 1861 – March 28, 1930) was a Japanese author, Christian evangelist, essayist, Biblical scholar, and founder of the Nonchurch Movement (Mukyōkai) of Christianity. At the age of sixteen, while attending Sapporo Agricultural College, Uchimura signed a "Covenant of Believers in Jesus," initiated by a missionary at the school, William S. Clarke. Determined to live by the Covenant, Uchimura dedicated himself “to Jesus and Japan.” In 1884 he went to the United States, where he worked at a mental institution and earned a second bachelor's degree in science at Amherst College. Uchimura returned to Japan and began working as a teacher, but on numerous occasions his religious principles conflicted with school policy and he was forced to resign. He became a journalist, founded his own magazine Seisho no kenkyu (“Biblical Studies”), and supported himself by giving weekly public lectures on the Bible.

In 1891 Uchimura’s refusal to bow deeply enough ("worshiping") before the portrait of Emperor Meiji and the Imperial Rescript on Education in a formal ceremony provoked a national controversy regarding the loyalty of Christians to the Japanese nation. In 1905 he organized Kyōyukai (教友会, NonChurch Movement), a network of individual Bible study groups deliberately unaffiliated with any Christian denomination, who believed that Christian sacraments were not essential to salvation and emphasized individual conscience and study of the Bible. Uchimura’s emphasis on conscience and individual responsibility, as well as his humanitarian ideals, had a far-reaching influence on modern Japanese writers and intellectuals.
Life

Early Life

Uchimura Kanzō was born in Edo (Tokyo), Japan, on March 23, 1861, to a samurai family, eight years after Commodore Perry anchored in the Bay of Edo. From a very early age, Uchimura exhibited a talent for languages: he started to study the English language at the age of eleven. The political changes following the Meiji Revolution (1867–1868) caused his father, who had been a capable samurai civil servant, to lose his status, position, and self-respect. When sixteen-year-old Uchimura received a government scholarship large enough to support the whole family, his father made him the head of the Uchimura family. In 1877, he gained admission to the Sapporo Agricultural College (present-day Hokkaido University), where the language of instruction was mostly English.

Just before Uchimura's admission to Sapporo Agricultural College, William S. Clark had spent a year assisting the Japanese government in establishing the college. While his primary role was to teach agricultural technology, Clark was a committed lay Christian missionary who introduced his students to the Christian faith through Bible classes. All of his students converted and signed a "Covenant of Believers in Jesus," committing themselves to continue studying the Bible and to do their best to live moral lives. Clark returned to the United States after one year, but Uchimura felt his influence through the small Covenant group that was left behind. Under considerable pressure from his senpai (先輩, senior peers), Uchimura signed the Covenant during his first year at the College at the age of sixteen and went on to receive baptism from a Methodist missionary in 1878.

Dissatisfaction with the mission church, however, led Uchimura and his Japanese cohorts to establish an independent church in Sapporo. This experiment turned out to be a precursor to what is now called the Nonchurch Movement. Through Clark's teaching and example, this small group believed that they could practice and live an authentic life of faith without the dependence on an institution or clergy.

Overseas Career

Uchimara signed his profession of faith with the intention of acting on it. At graduation, he and two other converts swore to devote themselves to two priorities, Jesus and Japan. Uchimura entered national service in Japan, but discouraged by a brief and unhappy first marriage, he departed for the United States in 1884 to learn methods of practical philanthropy. There he was befriended by Mr. and Mrs. Wister Morris, a Quaker couple, who helped him find employment shortly after his arrival in Pennsylvania. The faith and pacifism of these Quakers made a lasting impression upon Uchimura.
For eight months he worked at the Pennsylvania Institute for Feeble-minded Children in Elwyn, Pennsylvania, under the guidance of the superintendent, Dr. Isaac N. Kerlin. While there, Uchimura also met James B. Richards, a veteran teacher of the mentally defective. He developed a concern for the poor and handicapped which remained with him for the rest of his life.

After resigning from the Pennsylvania Institute, Uchimura traveled through New England, entering Amherst College in September 1885. Julius Hawley Seelye, the president of Amherst College, became his spiritual mentor. When Uchimura was struggling with a longing for personal spiritual growth, Seelye advised him, "Uchimura, it is not enough just to look within yourself. Look beyond yourself, outside of yourself. Why don't you look to Jesus, who redeemed your sins on the Cross, and stop being so concerned about yourself? What you do is like a child who plants a pot plant, then pulls up the plant to look at the roots to see if the plant is growing satisfactorily. Why don't you entrust everything to God and sunlight, and accept your growth as it occurs?"

Uchimura accepted this advice and began to experience spiritual growth within himself. Many years later, Uchimura recalled, “The great president opened my eyes to the evangelical truth in Christianity. He is my father in faith. For forty years, since then, I have preached the faith taught me by that venerable teacher.”

Julius Hawley Seelye encouraged him to attend the Hartford Theological Seminary. After completing his second bachelor’s degree (B.S.) in general science at Amherst, he enrolled in Hartford Seminary, but quit after only one semester, disappointed by theological education. Uchimura returned to Japan in 1888.

Japanese Religious Leader

After his return to Japan, Uchimura worked as a teacher, but was fired or forced to resign several times because of his uncompromising position toward the authorities or foreign missionary bodies who controlled the schools. Uchimura recalled, “On my return to Japan in 1888, I made several attempts to put my educational ideas into practice, but always failed. Missionaries nicknamed me a "school-breaker," because wherever I taught, troubles arose, and schools were put in jeopardy."

The most famous such incident was his refusal in 1891 to bow deeply enough ("worshipping") before the portrait of Emperor Meiji and the Imperial Rescript on Education in a formal ceremony held at the First Higher School (then preparatory division to the Tokyo Imperial University). Uchimura declared that the Japanese people were doomed because they worshiped a human being instead of God, the same circumstances which brought about the fall of man. A nationwide controversy arose regarding the loyalty of Christians to the Emperor, and many conservative Japanese began to persecute Christians. Uchimura resigned his teaching post. While he lay in bed, seriously ill with pneumonia, groups of students and protestors continually came to his house to threaten his life. His second wife, who was only twenty-three years old, pacified them and defended him, but soon she too caught pneumonia and died, after only twenty-one months of marriage.
Realizing that his religious beliefs were incompatible with a teaching career, and saddled with the financial burdens of his wife’s illness and his elderly parents, Uchimura turned to writing, becoming senior columnist for the popular newspaper, *Yorozu Chocho*. Uchimura's became famous when he launched a vocal attack against Ichibe Furukawa over one of modern Japan's first industrial pollution cases involving Furukawa's Ashio Copper Mine.

In 1893 Uchimura married for a third time, to an eighteen-year-old Christian girl. In 1900 he founded the magazine *Seisho no kenkyu* (“Biblical Studies”), which he continued to publish until his death in 1930.

Uchimura’s career as a journalist faltered after his outspoken avowal of pacifism in 1903, immediately before the onset of the Russo-Japanese War. During the War he continued to speak out against it, again raising the question of Christian loyalty to the state. Uchimura supported himself by addressing weekly audiences of five hundred to one thousand people in downtown Tokyo in lectures on the Bible.

Uchiyama and his wife had a daughter, Ruth, born during the time of their greatest personal hardship. She graduated from a women’s college and began work as a Biblical researcher, but suddenly, at the age of nineteen, she died, probably of tuberculosis. This devastating experience had an impact on Uchiyama’s faith, and he began to believe strongly in the resurrection of the dead. At his daughter’s funeral, he announced that it was not her burial day but her wedding day, and at the cemetery he grasped a fistful of the sand covering the grave and raised it to the sky in a gesture of victory. From 1918 he began to proclaim the imminent return of Christ.

In 1905 Uchimura officially established his "Mukyokai," or Nonchurch Movement, a network of individual Bible study groups independent of any Christian denomination, who believed that Christian sacraments were not essential to salvation. Uchiyama continued to preach and write until his death on March 28, 1930.

**Thought and Works**

**Background**

The Meiji Restoration in 1868, which placed the Emperor back in the central position of leadership over a unified nation of Japan, was motivated largely by the urgent need to establish a political and social structure which could withstand threats of colonization by Western powers. An essential element of this structure was the Shinto faith, which regarded the position of the Emperor as representing God to the nation and to every household. Christianity, which introduced the concept of a savior other than the Emperor, was therefore seen as a serious threat by conservative Japanese, who feared it would undermine their strength as a nation.

**Independence and the Value of the Individual**

Uchimura’s ideas on human independence and individual responsibility had an influence on modern Japanese intellectuals and writers that reached far beyond the circles of his religious movement. His passionate determination to live according to his beliefs, even when doing so
made him unpopular and the object of public criticism, made him an example of integrity in a conservative society which placed high priority on maintaining the existing social order. Uchimura’s humanitarian ideals, which included concern for the rights of the poor and uneducated and for the situation of the mentally handicapped, challenged traditional acceptance of such misfortune as the natural outcome of a previous ancestor’s bad behavior. People suffering from handicaps were often hidden away by families who were ashamed of them, while those in unfortunate circumstances were expected to regard them as necessary punishment and endure patiently in hopes of a better situation in the future.

**Nonchurch Movement**

Uchimura's interpretation of Christianity emphasized the central importance of the Bible and the individual conscience. In 1900, based on his Bible studies, he founded "Seisho no kenkyu" (Biblical Studies), advocating Mukyokai or Nonchurch Christianity, faith that is not tied to existing denominations or churches. His followers came to agree with Uchimura’s attitude that an organized church was actually a hindrance to the Christian faith, and that Christian sacraments, such as baptism and communion, are not essential to salvation. Uchimura's movement attracted many students in Tokyo who later became influential figures in academia, industry, and literature. Among the young intellectuals who gathered around him were the writers Masamune Hakudo, Mushanokoji Saneatsu, and Arishima Takeo, who in 1910 founded the influential Shirakaba (“White Birch”), a journal that served as a vehicle for their humanitarian ideals. Others were Tsukamoto Toraji (biblical scholar), Yanaihara Tadao (economist and president of the University of Tokyo), Nanbara Shigeru (political scientist and also president of the University of Tokyo), Oga Ichiro (botanist), Sekine Masao (Hebrew scholar and Member of the Japan Academy), Nakazawa Koki (biblical scholar), and Takahashi Saburo (theologian and independent evangelist).

Uchimura organized the Kyōyukai (教友会) in 1905, with fourteen branches and one-hundred-and-nineteen members. The purpose of the organization was defined in its profession of faith:

> We who believe in God and his Only Son whom he sent (into the world), uniting together, form the Kyōyukai. With the help of God the Father we shall help our comrades and live lives that are in harmony with His Sovereign Will.

Membership was restricted to individuals who had "endeavored to live the Christian life for at least a year." The guidelines for this association included a commitment to meet monthly, to spend Sunday nurturing faith and morals, and to abstain from tobacco and liquor. Members met in small, independent groups called "shukai" (Meeting) or "seisho shukai" (Bible Meeting) for weekly Bible study.

**Works**

The complete works of Uchimura consist of some fifty volumes; seventeen of primarily biblical studies, twenty-five volumes of theological works and eight volumes of diaries and correspondence. Uchimura’s major works were "Nihon oyobi Nihonjin" (Japan and the Japanese) (1894, later known as "Daihyoteki nihonjin" (Representative Men of Japan)), which reflects his
struggle to define a Japanese form of Christianity, and "Yo wa Ikanishite Kirisuto Shinto to Narishika" (How I Became a Christian) (1895). His best-known writings, however, are his three autobiographies, *Kirisuto-shinto no nagusame* (1893; “Consolations of a Christian”), *Kyuanroku* (1893; “Seeking Peace of Mind”), and "Yo wa Ikanishite Kirisuto Shinto to Narishika" (1895; How I Became A Christian). He also wrote essays and articles on Christianity and pacifism, and lectured extensively in Japan on the Bible.

During his lifetime, Uchimura became famous overseas and his works were translated into numerous languages. After his death, his followers produced a copious amount of literature Uchimura's *Complete Works* were translated and published in seven volumes (1971–73).