

Buraku-Diskriminierung in der japanischen Gesellschaft

Rev. Dr. Tim Boyle

The “Goliath” of “Buraku” Discrimination in Japan: “David”, in the Form of the Buraku Liberation Center, Takes on the Giant.

Japan Christian Activity News Summer 2006 While discrimination against minorities is a problem in all societies, the prejudices held against Japanese who come from a “buraku” background are rather different from what is typical in most countries. This is because it is not based on any outward differences — racial or otherwise, but on a politically inspired division in ancient times that still persists today. Perhaps the closest comparison in another culture would be the history of discrimination of the “dalit” (“untouchable” caste) of India.

The term “buraku,” in its non-pejorative usage, simply means “hamlet” or “village”, but interestingly, the characters used for this word literally mean “division, group” and “fallen.” Whatever the actual etymology of the word, however, this combination is highly suggestive of the reality of both the people who suffer discrimination and the society that produced it.

Though the roots of prejudice go back much further, the formal institutionalization of buraku discrimination dates from the early Edo period (1603-1867) and is closely tied with the persecution of Christians by Japan’s feudal rulers. For centuries, people who engaged in “unclean” occupations, such as leather tanners and other occupations related to animal death, had been considered “unclean.”

For some 50 years following the coming of western Christianity in 1549, the faith spread quickly. But because the “shogun” came to believe European powers planned to colonize Japan, he decided to completely isolate Japan from the outside and eradicate Christianity through severe persecution. A family register system was established that required everybody to register with a local Buddhist temple. It was this system that resulted in the institutionalization of buraku discrimination as well, requiring people designated as “buraku” to remain in their status and others to discriminate against them. Even though both the ban against Christianity and the official sanction of buraku discrimination were ended shortly after the beginning of the Meiji Era in 1873, people’s ingrained attitudes did not change so quickly. The influx of western missionaries and the tremendous social good that they accomplished won the respect of Japanese society in general, and so even though relatively few embraced the faith, Christianity was soon no longer viewed negatively.

When it came to buraku discrimination, however, there was no similar catalyst to cause a radical shift in people's perception. Even though the government has invested considerable funds into improving the 6000 or so buraku areas in Japan, civil rights legislation that criminalizes direct discrimination is still lacking. The net result is that the 3 million people of buraku origin still face discrimination, particularly in employment and marriage. The family-register system guarantees that those who want to avoid association with anyone with a buraku origin can easily do so, since their family register includes the fact that their family came from a buraku area.

Christians, of course, should work to end this discrimination simply as a civil rights issue, but the historical relationship Christianity in Japan has to buraku discrimination gives a special added impetus. The United Church of Christ in Japan (the Kyodan) established the Buraku Liberation Center in 1981 to educate its own members concerning discrimination issues and to work for the elimination of such discrimination. Several missionaries have worked with the center over the years, with Bob Stieber being the last one. His term of service abruptly ended, however, with his untimely death in 1999, and BLC has been hampered by the lack of missionary support since then. The work of the center took another huge blow in 2004, when its director of 20 years, Heichi Sumihi, became ill and died at age 51.

Presently, the staff consists of 2 full-time staff working under the direction of an interim, part-time director, Makoto Higashitani. Terumi Igarashi has been with BLC for 24 years, almost from its inception, and her experience and drive is what gives BLC its continuity. New to the staff is Miki Tanimoto, who has brought new energy to the work since coming aboard last year. There is also a management committee with representatives from each of the 17 districts of the Kyodan nationwide. Rev. Sanji Higashioka, a pastor in Hiroshima, is the chairperson of the committee, the purpose of which is to act as a conduit to the local churches to encourage their support and involvement.

The main activities of the BLC focus on educating and sensitizing the public through literature and seminars, etc. Likewise, BLC makes an effort to contact and support discriminated against minorities in other countries, to learn from them as well as share with them their own struggles and strategies.

When asked what their hopes and dreams are for the future, their first answer is, of course, that all such discrimination against people of buraku origins (as well as all other minorities) would come to an end. In order to see that day come, however, the biggest need of the BLC is for a new full-time director with a vision for the future and a new missionary to help with the work. They ask for our prayers that these goals will soon become reality.

Rev. Dr. Tim Boyle is a PCUSA/UMC missionary

Editor and Rev. Mano-san's notes:

There is a relationship between Christianity and the Buraku liberation movement. In the Suiheisha Declaration in 1922 they cried "The time has come when the martyr's crown of thorns will receive blessings". The declaration, which is deeply inspired by Christianity, is

moving. Even today, the Alliance for the Buraku Liberation uses Jesus' Crown of Thorns as their symbol. I believe this is a very good example showing that it is not necessarily the "Christians" who can hear the word of God, but that the word of God reaches and works with/in the people deprived of justice.

Anmerkung für Leser in Deutschland: von April 1991-Mai 1999 haben Pfarrer Andreas Hoffmann-Richter und seine Frau Carola im Buraku Liberation Center mitgearbeitet. Er ist jetzt in einem Pfarramt in Ulm.

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