

6-1-1966

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Recommended Citation

Neiswender, Donald (1966) "Christianity and Nichiren in Japan," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 37, Article 29.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol37/iss1/29>

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Christianity and Nichiren in Japan

DON NEISWENDER

There is a force building up in Japan which has a most threatening aspect, no matter whether one views it from East or West, from the base of the church or the base of communism. The throbbing nationalism of this force is antithetical both to the unity needed among free nations and to the enforced internationalism of communism. And since this force is preeminently a *religious* force, it must appear terribly anachronistic to a believing and practicing communist who believes that man is outgrowing his need of religion. It is also a heart-breaking phenomenon to behold from the viewpoint of those who labor to present Christ to the people of Japan, simply because such vast numbers of Japanese are turning to it rather than to Christ's church for satisfaction of spiritual needs. This powerful and growing force, which has already provided cover-story news for some of America's large magazines, is Soka Gakkai (Value-creating Society), a subset of the Nichiren branch of Buddhism.

If Soka Gakkai's actual rate of growth were only a fraction of that which it claims for itself, any attempt to speak of the present membership of the society would be outdated before it could appear in print. The Gakkai, which aims at the conversion of entire families and therefore numbers its members by households, now claims about 5,500,000 households in Japan,

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where this year's census showed an average of 4.4 persons per household. In 1951 the membership was a mere 5,700 households.

Yet, even after such colossal growth, the Gakkai is not the largest of Japan's non-Christian religions. Why then the special interest which this sect engenders? Perhaps one answer to this question lies in something which Soka Gakkai has that its religious rivals lack — its own political party! This Gakkai party, the Komeito (Clean Government Party) scored large gains in the last Tokyo metropolitan elections. This victory at the polls was greatly abetted by the fact that the ruling party, the Liberal Democrats, suffered greatly from public exposure of extreme corruption in the former government. But no matter how it is explained, the fact is that Komeito made great gains in Tokyo, and Tokyo sets the pace for other parts of the nation in almost every area of life.

Because of Komeito, if for no other reason (and there *are* other reasons), Soka Gakkai simply dare not be overlooked. The influential English-language daily, *The Japan Times*, frequently finds it necessary to devote space on its editorial page to the Gakkai and Komeito. Sometimes there seem to be grounds for encouragement for those who are opposed to the Gakkai, as when Komeito received only 5,100,000 votes in recent nationwide elections. But elation over this weak showing at the polls was short-lived. Not long after the elections, the Gakkai took part in a fund drive conducted by the Nichiren Buddhists for the purpose of building a massive central

temple at the foot of Mt. Fuji. When eight million workers turned out to gather the offerings and collected not the five billion yen which was their goal but 35 billion yen (nearly \$100,000,000), all those who have reason to dislike the Gakkai were dismayed. Not the least dismayed were the large political parties, the Liberal Democrats, the Socialists, and the Democratic Socialists, who all suffer greatly from financial indebtedness. Against the background of recent inroads of the Komeito into their majorities, how could they fail to wonder whether at least some of the 30 billion yen surplus contributed to the Gakkai might not find its way into Komeito campaign funds?

When the results of the election are compared with the results of the offering, two unpleasant conclusions seem to be indicated. First, much of the strength of the Gakkai and, hence, of the Komeito of the future, may well lie in millions of dedicated youth who have not yet reached voting age. Second, although most agree that the Gakkai makes its greatest growth among the lower classes of society and oppressed minority groups, these poorer people have a zeal which reaches seven times deeper into their purses than even their own religious leaders dared to hope. And this comes at a time when all the other major political parties are in debt!

Unless one is himself a member of Soka Gakkai, such happenings seem ominous. Amazingly, even the Rissho Koseikai, which is another Nichiren Buddhist sect, has felt it necessary to denounce publicly the Gakkai and to organize specific campaigns to resist its growing influence. Since the Rissho Koseikai is about as large as the Gakkai, no one can tell where such an

intra-Buddhist confrontation will lead. The Koseikai adheres more to the traditional Buddhist relativism which can get along with other religions, while the Gakkai is as absolutist as Christianity.

The future prospects of Soka Gakkai appear to be good from the Gakkai viewpoint and therefore bad from the Christian viewpoint. There does, however, appear to be some reason to hope that forces may yet arise which will effectively combat the growth of this Nichiren sect. There is the possibility that recent success at the polls and in the collection of the temple offering may finally force the larger political parties to active and determined resistance to Gakkai influence. Several young Japanese of various backgrounds have suggested to the writer that this is now certain to happen. If the Liberal Democrats and Socialists do engage in such open conflict, they will be doing no more than Rissho Koseikai is now doing. A renewed business boom in Japan would also perhaps curtail Gakkai growth by reducing the discontent of the laboring masses. Then, too, there is the possibility of major growth among the various Christian missions so that a growing and vital church may also obstruct Gakkai growth.

But the "iffy" character of these observations needs to be underscored. None of the above has yet managed to derail the Gakkai express. It is still true that nothing succeeds like success, and the Gakkai are succeeding at present in the all-important matters of winning new members and raising funds.

Their success must lie in the zeal of their members to propagate their faith. Some insist that witnessing and contributions are achieved under duress, and there may be

some truth in this charge. The Gakkai does indeed have a certain military style of organization and indoctrination. But generally this argument that the members have no choice but to work hard for their faith cannot be a full explanation (any more than it can explain the zeal of Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons in the United States).

The fact is that some people are finding *an* answer to some of their inner needs in the fellowship of the Soka Gakkai. We may believe it to be the wrong answer, but they think it is the right one, and *this* is what sends them from door to door on their systematic visitation campaigns. This is what brings their own newspaper off the press and gets it into homes free of charge. This is why they were willing to sacrifice in order to construct a central temple. This is what effects healings in their midst. This is what makes them faithful in praying their Buddhist rosary.

Their zeal takes the form of a tenacious witness known as *shappuku*, which means literally "coercive persuasion," and "coercive" is just the word to describe it. One high school student spoke with evident distaste of how Gakkai members harassed her mother, who had once attended one of their meetings but decided that the Gakkai was not for her. One missionary of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod experienced *shappuku* first-hand when he had the sad experience of seeing one of his members stray into the Gakkai fold and then make the effort to lead other Christians away from Christ. This same missionary had the experience of baptizing a graduate student of Waseda University who concurrently studied the Gakkai and the church and in the end opted for the Christian Gospel.

The impoliteness involved in a "coercive" witness antagonizes many Japanese. A psychiatrist practicing at one of Tokyo's hospitals tells how the Gakkai once illegally entered the wards where he works. Some hospitals in Japan continue the common oriental custom that when someone is hospitalized, a member of his family also moves into the hospital with him in order to care for him. Japanese law requires that such healthy residents of the hospital be members of the sick person's immediate family. The doctor had the experience of nonfamily Gakkai posing as the relatives of sick Gakkai members for the express purpose of reaching other patients when, due to their weakened condition, they might more easily succumb to *shappuku*.

On the Japan side of the Pacific one cannot help wondering what will be the effect in America of the large amount of publicity given to the Gakkai in American periodicals, both religious and secular. It seems a safe conjecture that if one were to consult the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, the *International Index*, and other such tools that already a significant bibliography could be compiled dealing with Soka Gakkai. What reception is this writing having among American readers? News reports here indicate that the sect is growing in California and that the growth is not confined to Japanese-Americans. The Gakkai sometimes (monthly, some reports say) charters a jet to fly some of its teachers to the West Coast of the United States. The word is that results, both in finances and conversions, make the trip well worthwhile. Here in Japan, at one airbase alone about 100 airmen have joined the Society. It is argued that most of them have Japanese wives who led them into the Gakkai.

The Gakkai is a modern revival of the

dream of Nichiren that one day the Japanese nation would adopt the law of Buddha as its national standard¹ and that from Japan this "gospel" would go into all the world. They now believe that they will achieve this Gakkai-dominated government through the continued growth of the votes concentrated in Komeito. What such a government would mean for the future of Christian missions in this land was recently made clear to one Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod missionary whose home was visited by some members of the Gakkai. After first being ridiculed because the few dozen members of his church seemed such a pathetically small number to his "guests," the missionary was told quite plainly that when Komeito controlled the government, all missionaries would be driven out.

When such a threat to the Christian church in Japan exists, it is important that the church understands its enemy. To seek such understanding only on the basis of current developments in modern Japan, and only in the areas of sociology and politics, cannot give a clear and comprehensive picture. The Gakkai is above all a religion, specifically a Nichiren Buddhist religion. In order to understand it, therefore, one ought to begin at the beginning by seeking to understand Nichiren. Such study is not only biographical, for to study the founder is to study the sect also, which so well mirrors the man Nichiren.² To this day

¹ Wm. Theodore deBary, Donald Keene and Ryusaku Tsunoda, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. LIV of the Records of Civilization series, ed. Jacques Barzun (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 230.

² G. B. Sansom, *Japan: a Short Cultural History* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1962), p. 333.

Gakkai religious life centers in the reading and study of the Lotus Sutra, which Nichiren elevated to the status of almost Ultimate Reality; the faithful repetition of the name of the Sutra which Nichiren taught was the only way to salvation; and the contemplation of the Mandala, a drawing by Nichiren which seeks symbolically to incorporate the truths taught in the Sutra.³ When modern sociological and political situations are seen against this religious background, perhaps the church in Japan will become more aware of the weak spots in Soka Gakkai, and thus better equipped to come to grips with this surging religious and political force.

The first question is: Who was Nichiren? He was a Japanese Buddhist reformer whose teachings can best be understood by placing them against the background of the times in which he lived (1222—1282). His life fell in that period of brutality, terror, and turmoil which characterized Japan between the collapse of the Heian society and the final unification of the nation under the Tokugawa Shoguns. Nichiren saw his beloved country internally ravaged by the violent struggle between the Taira and Minamoto clans, while the external threat of the seemingly invincible Mongols grew stronger each year.

Nichiren did not hesitate to preach, even to the nobility, that such suffering within the nation was caused by the fact that the Buddha's law had long been forgotten. He saw the Mongols in somewhat the same way in which Christians once saw Attila's Huns, namely, as the "scourge of God." Even when the nation successfully repelled

³ Gerhard Rosenkranz, *Der Weg des Bud-dhas* (Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 1960), p. 318.

two Mongol invasion attempts and also began to achieve a measure of internal solidarity under the Kamakura Shogunate, Nichiren still thought the future seemed very bleak, unless the leaders of the nation would turn to his own concepts of how Japan could become a true Buddha land. He capitalized on the growing sense of nationalism by incorporating nationalism into Buddhism. He grew increasingly intolerant of other forms of Buddhism, especially the Amidist doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in the Vows of Amida Buddha, which was preached by his great contemporary, Shinran.⁴ This absolutist tendency continued to grow even after the death of Nichiren until finally his sect was nearly exterminated in bloody riots in Kyoto in 1537, by which time his invocation of the Lotus Sutra, *Namu Myōhō Rengekyō!* ("Homage to the Lotus of the Wondrous Law!") had become almost a battle-cry instead of a devout confession of faith.⁵

The turbulence which is so evident in the life of this Buddhist leader was no doubt the mature growth of seed planted already in his childhood. Nichiren was born the son of a poor east coast fisherman in the province of Awa, which was associated in legend with the chief deity of the native Shinto cult, Amaterasu-O-Mikami, the sun goddess.⁶ As the child morning by morning beheld the glorious

arising of the great goddess,⁷ there grew in him a deep love of and sense of oneness with the whole nation of Japan, which was thought to be ruled by the direct lineal descendents of the goddess. The youth was perplexed by the many varieties of Buddhist teaching and suspected that the proliferation of sects had resulted in the obfuscation of the true intent of the historical Buddha, Shakyā, known better in the West as Siddhartha Gautama. Nichiren's studies led him to the conclusion that the older esoteric sects, as well as the more recently imported Amidist and Zen sects, were all in error and that full and final truth was to be found only in the relatively late Mahayanist scripture known as the Saddharma Pundarika, the Lotus of the Wondrous Law. This Lotus Sutra purported to be the final revelation of Shakyā, in which he stripped away the accommodations which had made his earlier teachings more understandable and fully and finally revealed the whole truth.⁸

When the young fisherman's son felt the call to preach the Lotus Sutra to the nation, he took the name of Nichiren and thus expressed his faith in his name. *Nichi* is the word for the sun and told of his devotion both to the goddess and to the nation of Japan, her chosen people. *Ren* means "lotus" and confessed his belief that the only way of salvation was to be found in the Lotus of the Wondrous Law.

This fiery preacher, whom one modern Jesuit scholar with 35 years' residence in Japan calls "a prophet both in wrath and

⁴ Devout Japanese Buddhists have been known to study German so that they may read the writings of Martin Luther, "the Shinran of the West."

⁵ Sansom, p. 375.

⁶ Raymond Hammer, *Japan's Religious Ferment in Christian Presence Series*, ed. M. A. C. Warren (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 187.

⁷ It must be remembered that Buddhism and Shintoism have generally been quite compatible in Japan and that many a Shinto Kami is held to be identical with a Buddha or a Bodhisattva.

⁸ Rosenkranz, pp. 304 f.

consolation,"⁹ in the course of his preaching seems to have aroused chiefly wrath in the rulers of the land. His vitriolic attacks upon the Hojo Regents at Kamakura, whom he labeled as the enemies of Buddha because they refused to outlaw every sect but his own, finally led in 1271 to the sentence of death.¹⁰ Yet even this was turned to Nichiren's good fortune, for as he knelt at midnight to receive the executioner's sword stroke, an inexplicable light flashed from heaven which was viewed as a warning omen and Nichiren's life was spared.¹¹ Some versions of the account say that lightning struck the sword from the executioner's hand. This incident, of course, tremendously increased Nichiren's certainty as to his calling, and although he was later banished, no ruler ever dared again to pass sentence of death upon him.

A statement of Nichiren's teaching would have to take the form of an analysis of the content of the Lotus Sutra. This cannot be attempted here, but the most disturbing element in his teaching was his absolutist attitude. Buddhism had long since been divided into the generally recognized schools of Southern or Theravada Buddhism and Northern or Mahayana Buddhism. Of these two divisions, Theravada is the older and taught that enlightenment came by way of personal ascetic practices. The more recent Mahayana school taught that enlightenment could come also to average people in everyday walks of life through the gracious help of

superhuman beings who were intermediary between men and Buddha. Nichiren rejected both of these on the basis of the Lotus Sutra which proclaims itself as the *Ekayana*, the One Vehicle of salvation, which supersedes the older two schools.¹²

It was largely to the common people that Nichiren directed his teaching. This is something of a paradox, since he was calling upon them to worship a scripture which most of them could not even read. Nichiren's answer to this charge was that the Lotus Sutra worked like a medicine, which cures the disease even though the sick person does not know how.¹³

At important points Nichiren's teaching is at odds with that of his great contemporary Shinran, who taught the people to rely on the saving vows of Amida as the only way to salvation. Both men indeed taught that faith alone can save¹⁴ and that religious growth in sanctity and learning is a fruit of faith.¹⁵ The difference between Nichiren and the Amidist is that Nichiren thought that faith in Amida as Savior was just one more stumbling block on the way to the truth of the Lotus. Salvation was indeed by faith, said Nichiren, but only by faith in the truth of the Lotus. People should not rely on the saving powers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but should rather live like them, by renouncing pride and resentment.¹⁶ The statement of Edward Conze, the British Buddhist scholar, that the Nichiren sect is "usually" considered a school of Amidism puzzles this

⁹ Heinrich Dumoulin, *The History of Zen Buddhism*, trans. Paul Peachey (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), p. 140.

¹⁰ DeBary, p. 221.

¹¹ Rosenkranz, p. 308.

¹² Hammer, p. 64.

¹³ Rosenkranz, p. 316.

¹⁴ DeBary, p. 222.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 220 ff.

writer.¹⁷ Perhaps it is due to the two schools' superficially similar appeal to the common man to "only believe" that some would try to lump the conflicting sects into one group. Nichiren's teaching is well characterized as "der Weg des kämpferischen Glaubens,"¹⁸ while Amidism does not seem to deserve such a bellicose reputation.

Perhaps Nichiren's most unique contribution to the religious life of Japan is that he was the first to found a Buddhist sect entirely free from Chinese influence.¹⁹ He did this by fusing the political welfare of Japan with its spiritual life, thus bringing into being a truly indigenous Buddhism.²⁰

There is, however, a very real question as to whether the nationalistic sect of Nichiren is Buddhist in nature as well as in name. When one compares the teachings of Nichiren with those of the historical Buddha, which are most nearly approached through the scriptures of the Pali Tripitaka, one might well doubt that Shakyas himself would wish to claim Nichiren as a disciple. The textual evidence is all against the claim of the Lotus Sutra that it is the final revelation of Shakyas. From a Buddhist point of view, the tragedy of Nichiren's teaching is painfully apparent. Although Nichiren thought he was leading men back to the pure teaching of Shakyas by calling men away from commitment to Amida Buddha, Locana Buddha, and others, the end result of his effort has been merely to add one more sect to the Japa-

nese scene and thus to make Shakyas himself appear as one more "name" by which the eternal Buddha makes himself known.²¹

Buddhists themselves sometimes do not like to reckon the followers of Nichiren among the followers of the Buddha. For example, Conze, after mentioning that the Nichiren sect is often considered a form of Amidism, suggests rather that

It would be more appropriate to count it among the offshoots of nationalistic Shintoism. Nichiren suffered from self-assertiveness and bad temper, and he manifested a degree of personal and tribal egotism which disqualify him as a Buddhist teacher.²²

While a Buddhist like Conze is thus led to excommunicate Nichiren for his aberrations, a non-Buddhist scholar may also make somewhat the same observations about Nichiren's character, while yet appraising him differently. Thus Sansom says that Nichiren was

unsparing of invective, and it is a pleasure to read such unstinted abuse in a language which is as a rule elaborately honorific. He called Kobo Daishi "the greatest liar in Japan," the Shingon doctors were "traitors," Zen was "a doctrine of fiends and devils," the members of the Ritsu sects were "brigands" and the *nembutsu*²³ "a hellish practice." Writing to a friend after hearing the news that the Mongol envoys had been executed, he said: "It is a great pity that they should have cut off the heads of the innocent Mongols and left unharmed the priests of Nembutsu,

¹⁷ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 306.

¹⁸ Rosenkranz, p. 302.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

²⁰ Sansom, p. 332.

²¹ Rosenkranz, p. 314.

²² Conze, p. 206.

²³ The *nembutsu* is the name given to the practice of invoking the name of Amida Buddha as the only way to enlightenment: *Namu Amida Butsu!*

Shingon, Zen, and Ritsu, who are the enemies of Japan.²⁴

Men have the right to demand of any preacher, whether Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or whatever he may be, that he conform his life to his own teaching. Nichiren preached against pride and resentment. Did he make any progress in overcoming them in his own life? Even with the strongest intentions to put the best construction on everything, one cannot say that Nichiren's life was characterized by humility and love for his opponents.

His feeling for those who disagreed with him is amply illustrated in the above quote from Sansom's history of Japan. His pride is almost constantly in evidence. It was in his conviction that he was an incarnation of the Bodhisattvas promised in the Lotus Sutra that he elevated himself to the position of the highest of men: "I, Nichiren, am the master and lord of the sovereign, as well as of all the Buddhists of other schools."²⁵ He considered himself especially to be the Bodhisattva of Superb Action, who was forever doing the best that could be done to save mankind, and the Bodhisattva Ever Abused, whom it seems nobody ever really appreciated. Nichiren was a man who could speak in one breath of his own "vast and comprehensive compassion" and then proceed in the next breath to describe how his own merits far surpass those of Saicho, who, as founder of the temples on Mt. Hiei, has exerted an influence on Japanese Buddhism which is second to none; of Nagarjuna, the first-century founder of the important Madhyamika movement; and of Kashyapa, the

very first Zen Master who, according to tradition, had the truth directly from Shakya himself.²⁶ He even taught that anyone who would make a pilgrimage to the place to which he had retired in his old age would be purged of all sin and depravity, that all his misdeeds would be transformed into virtues.²⁷

It would seem that somewhere in his life the desire to seek spiritual truth and to serve the people gave way to a prideful conviction of his personal infallibility. Suffering, of which Nichiren had to endure more than the average share, has a way of purging men of such ideas, and indeed it sometimes seems that even Nichiren began to see himself in a more realistic light. At times he can speak of his lowly origins and of the frailty he shares with all mankind and even with the animals. He can even say that his "soul is full of stains." But such feelings never really reach the depths of his thinking, no doubt because (and this is most impeccably orthodox Buddhist thinking) he could always blame any failings or sufferings on the evil *karma* accumulated in his previous lives in the cycle of birth and death, *Samsara*.²⁸

Even Nichiren's love for the common people does not seem to have remained as it was in his youth. Nichiren proclaimed that the Mongols were coming to chastise the nation because it had treated him badly. This famed prediction was no more a supernatural prophecy than it would have been for the Archbishop of Warsaw in 1939 to predict the coming of the Nazis. But while much is made of Nichiren's

²⁴ Sansom, p. 334.

²⁵ DeBary, p. 225.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

"prophecy," little is said about the fact that he also said that the Mongol invasion would succeed and that all Japanese would have to suffer because of it.²⁹ This latter part of the "prophecy" failed to take place, although humanly speaking there was little reason to believe that the Japanese would succeed in repelling the forces of the Khan, which had up until then proved invincible. A prophecy of the failure of the Mongol invasions would have been far more inexplicable on natural grounds, especially if it had included a foretelling of the "Divine Wind" (*Kamikaze*) which, by shattering the Mongol fleet, made possible the great victory of the defenders of Japan. From Nichiren's statements about these Mongols one might infer that he would rather have seen the nation in ruins than have had to admit a false prediction.

This very sketchy overview of the life and teachings of Nichiren leads one to conclude that in many respects the Soka Gakkai are true followers of him. After some 700 years Nichiren suddenly has come to be perhaps the dominant religious influence in the life of Japan. The future of Japan is bound to be affected by this revival.

There are several points, it seems to this writer, which offer to the Christian church effective points of rebuttal to Soka Gakkai. In some cases a careful study of the moral teaching and behavior of Nichiren and Jesus Christ may be helpful. The warmly humanitarian attitude of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to the militaristic, rigoristic, and exclusivistic attitude of Nichiren. Another point of witness involves the teaching about life after death in the system of

Nichiren and in that of the Christian religion. The question of how to face death is certainly a crucial one for every man and is as unavoidable as death itself. When Nichiren was being taken to the place of execution, he paused before the shrine of the War God, Hachiman, at Kamakura to inquire with very evident irritation why Hachiman and Amaterasu had dared to withhold their protection from him. He stated in his "prayer" at that time, "There is no fault in me whatsoever." He closed with a threat to publish the infidelity of Hachiman to the Buddha Shakyha himself, unless he was speedily delivered from death.³⁰ It will be helpful to explain to Japanese the entirely different spirit which marked Jesus Christ as the hour of His death approached. Nichiren's boast of his own faultlessness may serve as a point of departure to explain that this confidence is misplaced, and that the Christian teaching concerning the purpose of Christ's death gives man a different and reliable confidence in the hour of death.

Further, it should be remembered that the Soka Gakkai, the Value-creating Society, offers the people of Japan a truly good life in this age, according to their standards. The Christian message, rightly understood and proclaimed, not only offers the pattern and the motivation for creating a good life here and now, but also offers the sure promise of a blessed immortality. The words of Augustine need to be recalled by Japanese Christians in the face of the strongly materialistic program of the Soka Gakkai: "Our souls were created for Thee, and they are restless until they rest in Thee." Man cannot live by bread alone.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

CHRISTIANITY AND NICHIREN IN JAPAN

The unique claims and the distinctive message of the Christian Scriptures will continue to speak to puzzled people in the Land of the Rising Sun, as they have done

for 2,000 years to confused people in other lands.

Tokyo, Japan