DOI: 10.55105/2500-2872-2024-4-119-131

Christian influence on the culture of the blind in Japan

A.D. Bertova

Abstract. The blind in Japan have created their specific culture. As early as in the 14th century, they organized their own guild (*Tōdōza*) and succeeded in monopolizing a number of traditional entertainment and medical practices, having acquired a rather stable financial position. However, after the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and during the first reforms of the Meiji period, the guild was abolished together with its monopoly, and the blind found themselves in difficult circumstances, having to compete with the sighted, without practical support from the new government. In the early Meiji period, these were mostly Christian missions and private philanthropists who undertook measures to promote education of the blind and fought for their rights and welfare. Christian organizations founded first schools for the blind, such as the Tokyo School for the Blind and Dumb, which made many blind people wishing to acquire education interested in Christianity. The blind often became Christian converts and plunged into educational and philanthropical activities themselves. Major achievements in modernizing the life of the blind in Japan were made due to the work of blind Christians. Blind Christians launched the first Japanese newspaper and one of the first magazines for the blind, were the first among persons with visual impairments in Japan to get higher education, founded the first braille library and one of the first charity funds for the blind. Christianity not only contributed to the rise in living and educational standards of the blind, but also gave them possibilities to discover new ways of self-realization in acquiring new professions as well as in the sphere of spiritual development. For its followers, Christianity eradicated the concept of karma-bound blindness spread in traditional Japan and empowered them with the idea of their special mission in society entrusted to them by God.

Keywords: culture of the blind, Christianity, Japan, education, charity, welfare, people with impairments.

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Conflict of interests. The author declares the absence of the conflict of interests.

For citation: Bertova, A.D. (2024). Christian influence on the culture of the blind in Japan. *Yaponskiye issledovaniya* [Japanese Studies in Russia], 2024, 4, 119–131. (In Russian). DOI: 10.55105/2500-2872-2024-4-119-131

Влияние христианства на культуру слепых в Японии

А.Д. Бертова

Аннотация. Слепые в Японии с довольно раннего времени смогли создать свою специфическую культуру. Уже в XIV веке они образовали собственную гильдию (*Тōдōдза*), монополизировав целый ряд традиционных оздоровительных и развлекательных практик – массаж, акупунктуру, прижигания, игру на традиционных музыкальных инструментах. Это дало членам гильдии возможность довольно стабильного заработка. Однако в результате ликвидации сёгуната Токугава и начала преобразований Мэйдзи гильдия оказалась распущена, а слепые попали в тяжелое положение, так как больше не получали от нее поддержки и в условиях ликвидации монополии на свои традиционные занятия были вынуждены конкурировать со зрячими. В ранний период преобразований правительства Мэйдзи заботу о слепых и их образовании взяли на себя частные благотворители и христианские организации. Именно через посредство последних были организованы первые специализированные школы, например, Токийская школа для слепых и немых. Многие незрячие, желавшие получать образование, со временем принимали христианство, после чего сами активно включались в благотворительную и образовательную работу. Целый ряд ключевых достижений в жизни данной категории людей в современной Японии оказался реализован именно благодаря деятельности слепых христиан. Именно они способствовали, в частности, изданию первой газеты и одного из первых журналов для слепых, были в числе первых среди инвалидов по зрению, кто получил высшее образование, создали первую библиотеку и первый благотворительный фонд для слепых. Христианство не только способствовало повышению уровня жизни и образования незрячих в Японии, но и дало им возможность открыть для себя новые возможности как в области выбора жизненного пути, так и в сфере духовного развития. Для своих последователей христианство стало средством устранения представления о кармическом генезисе слепоты, распространенного в традиционной Японии, а также давало им уверенность в том, что им предопределена особая миссия в японском обществе, возложенная на них Богом.

Ключевые слова: культура слепых, христианство, Япония, образование, благотворительность, благосостояние, люди с ограниченными возможностями.

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Конфликт интересов: Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

***Для цитирования*:** Bertova A.D. Christian influence on the culture of the blind in Japan // Японские исследования. 2024. № 4. С. 119–131. DOI: 10.55105/2500-2872-2024-4-119-131

Introduction

Christianity is definitely a minority religion in Japan and can hardly be called successful in terms of figures – the number of its adherent floats around about 1% of the whole population of the country. However, the impact Christianity has exercised upon Japanese society goes far beyond these statistical data. In the latter half of the 19th century, Christian missions and members of the Japanese Christian community were among the most active leaders in the fields of modern education, medicine, human rights, welfare, and new type of family building [Bertova 2023, p. 4–6].

Among the fields of work Christian missions were vigorously engaged in were welfare and education of the disabled. In the period when the government of Meiji Japan aimed for rapid progress and modernization, the care for those who fell out of the concept of a civilized and healthy nation ready to compete with the West was a far-from-high-priority question. On the contrary, Christian missionaries and Japanese Christian converts thought it their duty to help the disabled and launched numerous benefactory and educational enterprises for the impaired.

The blind also experienced strong influence from Christianity, and many visually impaired in Japan became Christian converts. They took a surprisingly proactive position in the improvement of living standards of their fellow countrymen with visual impairments and soon overtook many educational and welfare initiatives from foreign missionaries, as well as organized their own cultural community having close ties with blind communities in other countries. Among the enterprises of blind Christians in Japan were the foundation of the Japanese Blind Association (*Nippon mōjinkai*), the first newspaper for the blind (*Akebono*) and the first newspaper in Japanese braille of a country-wide level – *Tenji Mainichi*, one of the first journals for the blind (*Shinkō*), the Japan Lighthouse (*Nippon Raitohausu*), a welfare organization for the blind, the first Japanese braille library (*Nippon Tenji toshokan*), Japan Christian Evangelical Council for the Blind (*Nihon mōjin kirisutokyō dendō kyōgikai,* or *Mōden*), and many others.

In this study, we will try to examine specific features of the blind community in Japan, analyze reasons for its close connection with Christianity after the Meiji Restoration, and throw a glance at the biographies of the most famous Japanese blind Christians.

A brief outline of the history of the blind in Japan

In medieval Japanese society blindness was often considered to be influence of the person's bad karma, or bad karma of his or her parents, which, in a sense, made the blind themselves responsible for their disability [Groemer 2001, p. 350]. The most efficient way of elimination of this bad karma were constant prayers to Buddha and taking monastic vows. However, even having become Buddhist monks, the blind seemed to have difficulties in acquiring stable positions in Buddhist hierarchy, which made them yearn for additional income. This was one of the reasons for the blind to stick together and help each other survive and strengthen their position in society.

During the Kamakura period (1192–1333), one of the most common occupations of the blind in Japan was performing the Tale of Heike (*Heike Monogatari*). Blind performers accompanied themselves on the *biwa*, a Japanese lute, and came to be known as *biwa hōshi*, itinerant *biwa* players dressed as Buddhist monks.

In the 14th century, the guild of the blind (*Tōdōza*) was formed in Kyoto, at first, as a place to train blind musicians to perform *The Tale of Heike*. The leaders of the *Tōdōza* claimed their lineage ascended to ancient aristocrats (for example, to the blind Prince Amayo, the son of the 9th century emperor Kōkō) and powerful samurai families, which helped them gain support of some aristocratic clans such as the Koga family [Ibid., p. 353], a branch of the Minamoto clan. As time passed, the *Tōdōza* spread its activities to a much wider range of fields, including various musical instruments and performing styles, medical practices, such as massage, acupuncture, moxa cautery, and even succeeded in essentially monopolizing them [Ibid., p. 350]. The blind were also enrolled in traditional theater as musicians and reciters.

There was also a number of the blind who were not members of the *Tōdōza*. The membership was quite expensive[1]; at the same time, women were not allowed to enter the *Tōdōza* [Tan 2022, p. 10], which made them establish their own guild, the *Gozeza*.[2]

In Tokugawa Japan, the *Tōdōza* managed to gain support from the government, and the original idea that derived person's blindness from their deeds in previous lives seemed to have lost its power [Ibid., p. 8].

On the contrary, the blind were permitted to practice moneylending business, which was previously the exclusive priority of merchants. The structure of the guild became more stratified. Thus, high-ranked members of the *Tōdōza* who gained considerable amounts of money were treated with much respect, compared to that of official doctors or Confucian scholars and sometimes were allowed to wear swords, while low-ranked members of the *Tōdōza* were handled in a much more disdainful way [Groemer 2001, p. 357].

At first, the government supported the *Tōdōza* as moneylenders, but soon the amount of loans given by the blind became so high that the *bakufu* was alarmed. After a number of cases when samurai loaners were not able to pay their loans back and lost their face,[3] the government started to oppress the blind. The blindness was often referred to as the consequence of a person's immoral behavior and greed [Ibid., p. 358]. Despite its wealth, the reputation of the *Tōdōza* and the blind on the whole was tarnished.

The blind seemed to be engaged in various spheres of the urban culture life, especially in the life of pleasure quarters where they worked as *anma* masseurs or music performers.[4] Still, their position was ambiguous: though at times welcomed by the government, the blind were often treated as outcasts by commoners; though the very few were respected, many were derided, exploited, and even abhorred.

Here, the two major traits of the life of the blind up to the 19th century can be distinguished. The first is the tendency of forming distinctive groups in the blind society, which was vitally important because it let people with impairments survive together, as the society regarded them as sinful and culpable for their own disabilities. The second is the blinds' proactive attitude to life which made them rely upon themselves in their search for the improvement of their position, not upon fate, chance, or external benefactors.

Blindness and Christianity in Japan

During the Tokugawa period, the blind were to a great extent dependent on their group and guild ties. However, after the forced "opening" of Japan by Western powers in 1854 and the Meiji

[1] Since a number of practices was monopolized by the *Tōdōza*, including musical performance and massage, the blind not enrolled in it had to limit themselves to various syncretic religious practices such as exorcism and reciting *Jishinkyō*, a sutra for pacification of the land deities. Such blind were called *mōsō* – «blind priests». In Tokugawa Japan, they tended to seek support from Buddhist sects or associated themselves with *onmyōji* diviners and *yamabushi* mountain ascetics. Besides, there were the blind who had to spend their lives in seclusion at their homes, totally dependent on their relatives.

[2] However, licenses in teaching *biwa*, *shamisen*, and *koto* music up to 1871, the date of the official abolishment of the *Tōdōza*, were given only to male blind performers [Frietsch 1992, p. 63].

[3] The samurai were considered to be the upper and the most respected social stratum, so the samurai sometimes took the liberty of not returning their loans to the merchants, the fourth and the lowest social stratum in Tokugawa Japan. However, if they took a loan from the *Tōdōza*, they had no other way than to return it, because in the other case the blind could be extremely tenacious in their attempts to get the money back. They followed their debtors all day round, shouting out obscenities, using the whole network of the blind of different regions to not let them escape [Taniai 1996, p. 83].

[4] Blind women were also active as performers and masseuses, but their position was even more vulnerable than that of the male blind. They were also exploited as prostitutes and beggars, as well as *itako* spirit mediums, mostly in the northern regions of the country.

Restoration in 1868, the Tokugawa samurai regime was replaced by the new government headed by the Emperor, and Japan launched its multilateral program of modernization, trying to catch up with the West. All relicts of the Tokugawa period were to be eliminated to construct a new modernized structure of society, so, in 1871, the *Tōdōza* was abolished, as were other guilds and professional groups of the blind.

As a result, the visually disabled were left without a considerable part of their income and social support.[5] The new government undertook numerous reforms in various fields and on different levels to preserve the independent status of the country. One of the goals of these reforms, together with overall modernization, was to construct the "new Japanese" able to compete with Western people. Thus, the Meiji government did not regard care for the disabled as a priority [Mishima 2004, p. 148], so the blind were left unprotected.[6]

In 1872, a new law concerning overall primary education for all Japanese children was adopted. Although the disabled were also subject to it, there were no special schools for them [Takahashi, Satō 2016, p. 1]. The welfare and education of the disabled, including the blind, fell into the jurisdiction of two ministries – the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Home Affairs, each of which tended to regard measures concerning the blind and their education a prerogative of the other.

According to the survey concerning the living conditions of the blind in Tokyo Prefecture conducted by the local government in 1874, more than a half of the blind residing in Tokyo were jobless. The government also prohibited such practices as healing ceremonies and performing prayers for money, equating them to begging [Mochizuki 2013, p. 31], which left the former blind priests *mōsō* on the brink of starvation.

Despite the fact that there were progressive individuals close to the government, such as Yamao Yōzō (1837–1917), who insisted that the disabled needed to have a workable education and employment system suited for them to get new viable professions, the state hesitated, and the matter of education of the blind transferred mainly to private benefactors and Christian missions [Hirose 2003].

The early Meiji history of education for the blind can be divided into three periods: the first, from the 1870s to the 1890s, was mostly characterized by the activities of Christian missionaries and sighted benefactors – physicians and educators[7]; the second, from the 1890s to 1905, saw the emergence of schools founded by people with visual impairments, who began participating in the enlightenment of the blind; in the third, from 1905, the end of the Russo-Japanese War, the blind took one of the leading parts in their own education, turning to self-advocacy and accentuating their rights; at the same time, officials gradually came to the understanding that, in a civilized country Japan positioned itself to be, the government was expected to take a more considerable part in the welfare of the disabled [Adachi 2020, p. 10–11]. In all the three periods, Christianity was one of the main strings to support and inspire the blind and their benefactors.

In 1876, a group of individuals centered around Japanese Christians and Western missionaries established a charity institution named *Rakuzenkai*. One of its founders was Tsuda Sen (1837–1908),

[5] During the Tokugawa period, a part of the money gained by the high-ranked members of the *Tōdōza* was reserved for support and education of the low-ranked members, so that the latter could acquire important skills for the profession of a masseur or an acupuncturist, as well as a musician.

[6] Mochizuki Chikako in her dissertation argues that, previously, high-ranked members of the *Tōdōza* comprised only 16.7% of the entire blind population of Japan in the early Meiji period. These people were still able to support themselves for some time working as masseurs, acupuncturists, and music and theater performers. However, the rest 83.3% of the blind belonged to the lower ranks of the *Tōdōza*, and, after the abolishment of the guild, they were deeply impoverished, because the guild was no longer able to provide for their education and employment [Mochizuki 2013, p. 29].

[7] On the missionary side, one of the key roles in the development of care and education of the blind belonged to the so-called medical missionaries who began their work in Japan at the end of the Edo period (since 1859), as well as their direct and indirect Japanese disciples. On medical missionaries in Japan, see [Yamada 2018].

a prominent Christian philanthropist, educator, and scientist.[8] The members of the *Rakuzenkai* thought it necessary to organize a proper system of education for people with impairments, including the blind, and provide them with materials to study. Their first enterprise was the ordering from the American Bible Society of a book with excerpts from the Bible written in tactile letters suited for the blind.[9] There was still no analogue of braille letters in Japan, so the members of the *Rakuzenkai* decided to teach the blind to read and write using romanized Japanese letters.

One of the key issues discussed by the members of the *Rakuzenkai* was the establishment of a school for the blind and deaf in Tokyo. With the support of Yamao Yōzō (1837–1917), a famous educator and a member of Meiji government, the school was founded in 1880 (it became the second school for the disabled in Japan after the one in Kyoto, founded in 1878 by educator and philanthropist Furukawa Tashirō (1845–1907)). Later it became known as *Tōkyō Mōa Gakkō* – Tokyo School for the Blind and Dumb [Takahashi, Satō 2016, p. 3]. By the end of 1882, its curriculum included both basic subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics, and a more expanded list of disciplines, such as geometry, geography, Japanese history, the ancient national culture, music, acupuncture, and massage [Mochizuki 2013, p. 37]. These subjects allowed students with impairments to acquire knowledge close to the one students without impairments could receive, and, at the same time, to obtain skills necessary for future employment. The *Rakuzenkai* sponsored both school in Tokyo and Kyoto, though in 1885 it was asked to hand over the management of the Tokyo School for the Blind and Deaf to the Ministry of Education.

In 1880, a Methodist missionary Charlotte Draper together with her husband founded the Yokohama Christian School for the Blind[10] and, in 1889, established the Yokohama Evangelist Association for the Blind; in 1894, in Gifu, the Gifu Anglican School for the Blind was established. Its first director, an Anglican Christian Mori Kenji (1855–1914), suffered from progressive eye illness and became blind. However, this fact made Mori Kenji take even more active part in the education of the blind. These institutions became a part of a chain of analogous schools, the aim of which was not only to give education to the blind, but also to make them rightful members of society and foster their employment. To a large extent, these educational establishments were designed according to Western standards.

In 1890, an educator of the Tokyo School for the Blind and Dumb, Ishikawa Kuraji (1859–1944), invented a six-dot Japanese braille system [Mishima 2004, p. 328]. It was a breakthrough for the blind who had already understood the importance of education in modern Japan and needed to get information through reading and transmit it through writing. The invention of Japanese braille widened the access to education for the blind.

However, materials published in Japanese braille were far from enough. It made blind intellectuals yearn for knowledge and learn English. Understanding of English empowered the blind with the possibility to read Western braille books, magazines, and newspapers to be in the know of the life inside and outside Japan. English braille books were mainly accessible through

[8] For more on Tsuda Sen, see, e.g., [Бертова 2022, с. 103–107]. Other Japanese members were Christian educators and philanthropists Furukawa Masao (1837–1877), Nakamura Masanao (1832–1891), and Kishida Ginkō (1833–1905).

[9] The excerpt was the Gospel of John, Chapter 9 [Mochizuki 2013, p. 36]. Later, for many blind people in Japan, Chapter 9 became a turning point for their spiritual revival, self-assertion, and one of the reasons to turn to Christianity. See [Teshirogi 2005, p. 263–264].

[10] The Yokohama Christian School for the Blind was a quite popular private educational institution that succeeded in keeping its private character when many similar institutions were taken by the government. It was active in international exchange, and, in the 1930s, managed to develop close ties with the Perkins School for the Blind, the most famous school of this type in the USA, the alma mater of Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller. Due to exchange programs between the schools, Japanese blind female students could train at the Perkins School and develop their own courses for the Japanese blind with the usage of modern educational methods for the visually impaired [Mochizuki 2013, p. 56–57].

Christian missions, which also attracted the Japanese blind to churches and Christian educational establishments for the blind.

In 1890, the Ministry of Education determined the rules for schools for the blind and deaf, but schools for the blind were separated from those for the dumb and deaf not earlier than in 1909. However, the education for the blind finally gained legal support only in 1923, with the enactment of the law on the schools for the blind and deaf. According to this law, every prefecture was obliged to have at least one school for the blind and for the deaf. By 1924, there were 72 schools for the blind, including one national, 21 local public schools, and 50 private schools [Monbu kagakushō]. Most of the private schools were run by Christian missions, Japanese Christians, or associated with Christian welfare organizations.[11]

The pioneer of self-advocacy of the blind was a prominent educator, businessman, and social worker Yoshimoto Tadasu (1878–1973). Yoshimoto suffered from eye illness from his childhood and almost lost his vision when he was a schoolboy. He managed to finish the Tokyo High Commercial School (*Tokyo kōtō sangyō gakkō*) and was eager to continue his studies to receive higher education. However, as he was partially blind, it was almost impossible for him to receive higher education in Japan.

Under the influence of a famous Christian leader Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930), the founder of the first Japanese indigenous Christian movement *Mukyōkai*, Yoshimoto converted to Christianity. With the help of Christian missions, he went to Britain and entered Oxford university. Thus, he became the first person with grave visual impairments in Japan to receive higher education [Mishima 2004, p. 328]. In Britain, Yoshimoto was profoundly impressed by British social system that supported the blind. Eventually he took his residence in Britain, but visited Japan nine times [Morita 2010, p. 6]. Every time he returned, Yoshimoto tried to support the blind in his country, give them an impetus for further development, showing by his own example that a visually impaired person could not just receive higher education, but was also not limited to the traditional Japanese blind professions. Yoshimoto also became a successful author, as his book True Britain (*Shin Eikoku*) gained popularity in various circles. He was a proponent of Anglo-Japanese friendship and British educational and welfare system. Being a Christian, Yoshimoto closely associated scientific and social progress, especially in the field of the care for the disabled, with Christian spirit, and was eager to spread Christianity among the Japanese blind. Getting money from the trading company he had founded, Yoshimoto launched a number of evangelist and educational projects for the blind, the most famous of which is the Japanese Association of the Blind mentioned below. Yoshimoto, who is often called "the father of the blind" (*mōjin no chichi*) in Japan, marked with his efforts the turning point in self-advocacy of the blind, when the transformation of the visually impaired from passive recipients to active doers began.

The second stage of the activization of the blind in educational and welfare spheres was closely connected with the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. During the war, many soldiers and officers had lost their vision, and the government became more interested in supporting them and various private activities concerning the blind. At the same time, the blind, having received an impetus from foreign and Japanese benefactors, entered the scene of struggle for their own rights, education, and employment.

In 1905, Sakonjō Kōnoshin (1870–1909), a former soldier who had lost his sight after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), founded a private school for the blind in Kobe (*Kobe kunmōin*) [Murota 2021, p. 135–136]. Inspired by Christianity he adopted while trying to adjust to his loss of sight, Sakonjō took active part in various activities concerning the blind. He invented and introduced the first Japanese braille type-printing machine with the help of the believers of Tamon Christian

[11] However, by 1939, the proportion of public and private schools changed – on the whole, there were 78 schools for the blind, with 1 national, 51 local public, and 26 private [Monbu kagakushō]. These figures imply that the government turned a number of successful private schools into public ones, thus diminishing direct foreign (and Christian) influence.

Church in Kobe. Sakonjō is famous for establishing the first Japanese braille newspaper "The Dawn" (*Akebono*)[12] in 1906 and for printing the first Japanese version of the Four Gospels (*Shifukuinsho*) in Japanese braille.

In 1906, Sakonjō Kōnoshin together with Yoshimoto Tadasu and Okumura Sansaku (1864–1912), another blind educator, founded the Japanese Association of the Blind (*Nippon mōjinkai*), an organization, the aim of which was to promote welfare, education of the blind, support them in their search for employment and provide them with Japanese braille books and materials. Board members of the Association were either Christians or had close ties with Christianity [Morita 2010, p. 9].

One more aim of the Association was to propagate Christianity among the blind. Indeed, for many blind, Christian faith was not only the way to become familiar with the progressive Western culture and get access to Western ideas and technologies, as it was for many Japanese Christians without impairments. For the blind, in most cases, Christianity opened a new world and proposed a new way of self-consciousness. One of the most vivid examples of the overturning impact of Christianity on the life of the blind is the life story of Kumagai Tetsutarō (1883–1979), the first Japanese blind pastor and educator. Kumagai was born in a village in Hokkaido and lost his sight when he was a child because of smallpox. The only way to make his living was to study massage, acupuncture, and medicine, which traditionally were the most accessible work spheres for the blind. However, Kumagai wanted to continue his education. For a while, he worked as a masseur at the pleasure quarters to get enough money and move to Sapporo, where a new school for the blind had been built. However, when he arrived, the school was still inactive, and he was advised to go to a Christian church [Murota 2021, p. 125–126]. There, he found a new world, absolutely different from his previous life in the pleasure quarters [Kumagai 1932, p. 100–103]. He began his studies of the Bible and English.

The most overwhelming experience for him was the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, narrating about Jesus healing a blind person [Ibid., p. 118–119]. In this chapter, the disciples, seeing a blind person on the road, asked Jesus if the blindness was the result of the blind's or his parents' sins, and Jesus answered that it was not the result of sins, but happened so that the works of God might be displayed on the blind. After having been healed, the blind believed in Jesus as Son of God, appearing to be much more "sighted," seeing the true Light, than the Pharisees. For Kumagai, it was a revelation that blindness might not be a result of karma and not his or his family's fault, but God's bliss, allowing the blind to be more responsive to God's will than the sighted.

Kumagai converted to Christianity and, with the support of his church, went to Tokyo to study at the Tokyo School for the Blind and Dumb [Murota 2021, p. 129–130]. After his studies, he proceeded to higher education at Kwansei Gakuin University, where he was the only blind student [Murota 2021, p. 137]. He acquired a good knowledge of English and also worked as an interpreter. After graduation, Kumagai became a pastor and continued transmitting his experience to other Japanese blind as well as to the sighted.

Having become a pastor, he "opened" a new profession for the blind, and further he considered it his task to open more professions that previously had been accessible only to the sighted. Christianity released the blind from the burden of karma, so they could freely participate in social life and choose any occupation they were inclined to. Under Kumagai's influence, many blind became Christian converts and even pastors.[13]

Prominent blind Christians appeared in such fields as journalism, pencraft, poetry, Western and traditional Japanese music, librarianship, science, language studies, business, welfare, and education.

[12] The *Akebono* was a newspaper centered not on the political or social news in Japan and in foreign countries, but rather on practices important for the blind – employment announcements, description of acupuncture and massage techniques, advertisements of welfare enterprises, etc.

[13] One of the charismatic blind pastors of the period was Ishimatsu Ryōzō (1888–1974), the teacher of the most famous Japanese Christian theologian Kitamori Kazō (1916–1998).

Famous editor and educator Akimoto Umekichi (1892–1975) became blind as a child, entered Tokyo School for the Blind and Dumb, where he first read the Gospel of Mark and was so impressed that he converted to Christianity. He attended Bible classes headed by Uchimura Kanzo and formed a group of young blind Christians that, in 1915, launched a magazine for the blind, named *Shinkō* ("Light of Faith", further it changed its name to "Faith"). It was so successful that it is still active today, and, after WWII, its publication was overtaken by the Japanese Christian Evangelist Council for the Blind (*Mōden*). In 1919, together with Nakamura Kyōtarō (1880–1964), Yoshimoto Tadasu, Hirakata Tatsuo (1889–1976), Torii Tokujirō (1894–1970), and other blind Christians, Akimoto established the Association of Christian Faith for the Blind (*Mōjin Kirisuto Shinkōkai*). One of its aims was to translate the Bible to braille to make it accessible to the blind. Thus, in 1924 Akimoto became the first to translate and publish the Old Testament in Japanese braille. Later, the Association continued its activities under the name *Tōkyō Hikari no Ie* (Tokyo House of Light).

Blind Christian activists who formed the Association were in the vanguard of educational thought in Japan and were eager to make the blind full-fledged members of society. For example, Nakamura Kyōtarō, a blind Christian journalist and educator, is famous for founding the first nation-wide newspaper for the blind in Japanese braille – *Oosaka Tenji Mainichi* ("The Osaka Braille *Mainichi*"), which was established in 1922 and is still going under the name *Tenji Mainichi* ("The Braille *Mainichi*"). Today, "The Braille *Mainichi*" claims to be the only newspaper for the blind in Japan that independently gathers information and news for the visually impaired.[14]

Blind Christians were vigorously engaged in language studies. At first, it was the study of English: there was a considerable lack of Japanese braille books, and, to compensate for it, those who were eager to get education needed to use English braille books. It stimulated them to learn English. In addition, through English, they could communicate directly with missionaries, foreign lecturers, scientists, welfare workers not only in Japan, but also in the West. It gave them possibilities to study abroad, present their projects and make the Japanese blind community known in other countries.

Besides English, the language that exercised great influence upon blind Christians in Japan was Esperanto. The language that was designed to unify people of different nations, allow them to communicate with no borders and create an international community supporting all of its members, seemed to many blind Christians a medium of realization of God's Kingdom on Earth.

One of the key persons in Esperanto studies, as well as in the development of welfare of the blind, was Iwahashi Takeo (1898–1954).[15] Iwahashi became blind in his student years and was close to complete despair [Murota 2017, p. 119], but he became acquainted with a blind pastor Kumagai Tetsutarō [Murota 2021, p. 139–140], who invigorated Iwahashi and motivated him to study, to learn English, showing that blindness was not a sentence. Chapter 9 of the Gospel of John became a guiding thread for Iwahashi as well [Murota 2009, p. 29]. Having converted to Christianity, Iwahashi became interested in Esperanto and joined a group of Esperanto-speaking intelligentsia, to which Kumagai also belonged. Through Esperanto studies, he could deepen his ties with people of different countries.[16] Iwahashi graduated from Kwansei Gakuin University and became a schoolteacher in Osaka. In 1927, he went to Scotland to study at Edinburgh University and was impressed by the welfare system for the blind there. He also was introduced to the Religious Society of Friends and became a Quaker [Murota 2017, p. 120].

[14] Hamai Yoshifumi. The Braille Mainichi, Japan's only newspaper for the blind, marks 100th anniversary. 2022. May 12. URL: https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220512/p2a/00m/0na/011000c

[15] For more details on Iwahashi Takeo, see [Murota 2009].

[16] For example, one of those who had close connections with Japan and exercised significant influence upon Japanese blind Christians was Vasili Eroshenko (1890–1952), a blind educator, writer, esperantist, and linguist. Eroshenko visited Japan twice, each time for about two years, and was much respected by blind Japanese Christians studying Esperanto.

After his return to Japan, he worked as a lecturer at Kwansei Gakuin University and continued his Esperanto studies. In 1928, together with a blind Christian Torii Tokujirō he founded the Japan Esperanto Association for the Blind (*Nippon mōjin esuperanto kyōkai*).

Iwahashi took an active position in various movements propagating Christianity and aiming at the improvement of life conditions of the poor and disabled. From 1930, Iwahashi participated in the God's Kingdom movement (*Kami no kuni undō*) headed by one of the most charismatic Christian leaders of the time, Kagawa Toyohiko (1888–1960).[17] Iwahashi developed close connection with Kagawa and gained his support in his undertakings concerning the blind.

Iwahashi's desire to improve conditions of the blind and enrichen their intellectual life was such that he dared to directly contact Helen Keller (1880–1968), the first deafblind person in the USA who received higher education and became famous all over the world. Iwahashi visited Keller at her house and established connection with her. Inspired by the visit, Iwahashi returned to Japan and, in 1935, founded a welfare organization named Japan Lighthouse (*Nippon raitohausu*) [Mishima 2004, p. 329]. Its goal was to accumulate information necessary for the blind to lead a proper life and help them in their efforts. Together with braille publishing activities, it conducted courses teaching the blind important skills to get employment, campaigns explaining to the sighted what blindness was, to make Japanese society more inclusive towards the blind. In 1937, Iwahashi invited Helen Keller to Japan for the first time,[18] and her arrival became an important landmark in the struggle of the blind for their rights and in their recognition in Japan and abroad.

Driven by the idea of creating a territory where all Asian blind could unite and defend their rights and dignity, Iwahashi supported Japan's military expansion to the continent. However, the end of WWII showed the delusiveness of his hopes.

After the war, the blind in Japan were in a poor condition. Many of them died from bombings and starvation, and there was no support from the government. On the other hand, many Japanese soldiers became blind because of war injuries, and they had to adjust to their new life. This made Iwahashi contact Helen Keller, describe the situation with the blind and ask for support. Keller managed to raise the funds and arrived to Japan for the second time in 1948. After her visit, Iwahashi and his blind friends founded the Japan Federation of the Blind (*Nihon mōjinkai rengō*). The federation is still one of the most powerful means to support the blind in Japan, to provide them with necessary materials for studies, employment, and self-realization.

Iwahashi and his followers did much to publish more books in Japanese braille. One of his students, a blind Christian Honma Kazuo (1915–2003), is famous as a founder of the first Japanese braille library for the blind. In 1940, he established the Japan Library for the Blind (*Nippon mōjin toshokan*) [Mishima 2004, p. 330] in a private house on the outskirts of Tokyo. When bombings of Tokyo began, Honma moved first to Ibaraki, then to Hokkaido with his braille books, and the library was saved. In 1948, the library was rebuilt in Tokyo and restarted its work under the name of Japan Braille Library (*Nippon tenji toshokan*). At present, this library is the oldest and the largest braille library in Japan.

After the war, the period of American occupation began, and it invigorated ties between Japanese Christians and foreign missionaries, most of whom had left Japan during the war. In 1948, Helen Keller visited Japan again, and, for the blind, her arrival was equal to a beam of hope. She brought financial support to Japanese blind using the money she had raised with the help of the interdenominational John Milton Society for the Blind. The Society was established in 1928 to provide spiritual guidance for the blind and spread Christian literature among them. It gave a vivid response to the sufferings of the blind in Japan and contributed the sum that was enough to establish in 1951 the Japan Christian Evangelical Council for the Blind (*Nihon mōjin kirisutokyō dendō kyōgikai,*

[17] For more on Kagawa, see [Mullins 2007], [Бертова 2020].

[18] Helen Keller visited Japan three times – in 1937, 1948, and in 1955.

or *Mōden*). The establishment of the Council was the result of joint efforts of blind Christians and the United Church of Christ, the largest interdenominational Protestant organization in Japan. Its board consists both of the blind and the sighted, and the aim of the Council is to create a ground where both the visually impaired and the seeing Christians are able to communicate; it also spreads Christian braille literature, records and tapes among the blind in Japan [Nihon mōjin kirisutokyō dendō kyōgikai]. The credo of the Council is the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John.

On the basis of the Counsil, various events take place, one of them being the conference of blind pastors. Most pastors belong to the United Church of Christ, and there are accounts of family pastorship among blind pastors, when people of the third generation become pastors, with their grandfather and father being blind pastors [Tamada 2017]. It is interesting to note that the Council continues to supervise most of the initiatives of prewar blind Christian organizations, such as, for example, the magazine *Shinkō* ("Faith"), one of the most long-running magazines in Japan, so the blind Christian community in Japan can also be characterized by its continuity and congruity, despite all problems it has had to face.

Conclusion

The blind in Japan have developed their specific culture. Its characteristic features are the tendency to cooperate with each other and unite efforts struggling for their rights, as well as their proactive stance and understanding that none other than themselves can be responsive for their wellbeing. These features stayed with the blind even after the elimination of traditional organizations providing their employment.

Having received a short shocking experience after the liquidation of the *Tōdōza* in the Meiji period, the blind could regain their activeness through Christianity: in fact, many blind became Christians while adjusting to their blindness. Christian thought had an uplifting effect upon the blind and helped strengthen their self-consciousness through breaking previous considerations of the karmic character of blindness and regain their vigor. Christianity was also popular because of its connection with Western countries, famous for their progressive attitude towards the blind and their advanced medical system. Through Christian missions and associated educational establishments, the blind in Japan got access to communication with foreign educators, acquired possibilities to study and live abroad, presented their organizations to the world.

Many enterprises of the first Japanese blind Christians still run nowadays, and their initiatives became predecessors of contemporary governmental projects concerning people with visual impairments.

Modern means of education of the blind and welfare system in contemporary Japan allow to provide a high rate of inclusiveness of the blind into society. However, these results could hardly have been achieved without blind Christians' desire to learn, struggle for the rights of the disabled, and without their faith in being not karmically destined sinners, but people beloved by God and intended to most brightly manifest God's will on Earth by being able to see the real internal light and the essence of things.

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Поступила в редакцию:	20.08.2024	Received:	20 August 2024
Принята к публикации:	20.10.2024	Accepted:	20 October 2024