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RELIGION, COMMUNITY, AND GROWTH IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Yasuo OKADA

Abstract: This article investigates the role of religion in the economic development of the American West. The Anglo-American frontier in the Middle West, the Mormon settlement in the arid West, and the Japanese community on the West Coast are examined in order to illustrate the organizational consequences of religion upon frontier development. In spite of the differences in doctrine and outlook, Protestantism, Mormonism, and Buddhism alike helped to build communities in the wilderness, which paved the way for economic development. Although Catholicism is not treated in this paper, it must have played a similar role for the Catholic immigrants in the urban wilderness.

Economic historians have pondered over the relations between religion and economy ever since Max Weber published his thesis on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. During the past two or three decades, however, the practitioners of American economic history have seldom touched upon the subject of religion. The rise of new economic history and the popularity of cliometrics are probably responsible for the neglect of religious and, more broadly, cultural factors. In contrast, the surge of social history seems to renew the interest in religion among historians, although most of them are not concerned with the Weber thesis *per se*.¹

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the role of religion in the economic development of the American West. As an economic historian of the traditional mold, I have been studying the history of the frontier, especially the public land policies, and have paid due respect to cultural factors. It would be nice if I could say that Protestant homesteaders had been more successful than Catholic homesteaders, or that the Protestant spirit of hard work and success had been the basis of western development. But I do not enter into this kind of question. My attention will be focused on the organizational consequences of religion rather than the relation between religion and economic activity on the frontier.²

Before going into the main issue, it will be necessary to say a few words on the definition of the frontier. Since "frontier" has been defined in a number of ways,

¹ See Davis et al. (1972), Fogel and Engerman (1971), and North (1966). A recent survey of cliometrics is McCloskey (1987). A collection of essays in social history is Hahn and Prude (1985). Also see Kammen (1980).

² For further details on the relationship between cultural factors and economic activity, see Schafer (1927; 1932; 1937), Lemon (1972), and Cogswell (1975).

we should ascertain which frontier one is talking about in order to avoid confusion. For those with the literary bent, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" will be the best. Another one, "the margin of settlement which has a density of two or more persons to the square mile" may suit the taste of statistically inclined historians. However, the most satisfactory one for me is this: frontier is the place where new communities are built in the wilderness. In spite of the Turnerian emphasis on individualism, recent scholarship seems to pay more attention to the importance of communities on the frontier. It is in this context that I propose to examine the role of religion in the development of the West.³

The Methodist circuit riders or camp meetings will certainly come to mind when I speak of the religion on the frontier. However, I do not intend to devote too much time to these colorful figures or exciting events. Neither do I plan to dig into the doctrine of various denominations which flourished in the West. I will rather focus on the part taken by religious organizations in the building of communities in the American West.

Herbert Bolton, one of the past masters of western historiography, showed that Spanish missionaries had helped to advance the Spanish-American frontier. The missions were military outposts as well as religious institutions. It is true that Franciscan friars taught Christianity to the Indians, and created successful agricultural communities. But they were mainly the instrument of Spanish government to expand its colonial empire. In New France, the religious orders were equally important in the colonial enterprise. Jesuit missionaries were quite active in expanding the French frontier, and settlers built their communities around the church. When the population in new areas increased and the number of people became sufficient to support a new church, a new parish would be created on the frontier. The early chapters of Canadian history would be incomplete without the presence of the Catholic church.⁴

The activities of the Protestant and other churches on the Anglo-American frontier were of course quite different, especially after the American Revolution which resulted in the separation of church and state. But it is my contention that religious organizations in the American West also contributed to the growth of settlement by providing the core of communities on the frontier. A bank, a courthouse, or a school could be a nucleus of a community. The church, however, could provide people on the frontier with deeper feeling of community more than any other institutions.

Although church historians chronicle the success and failure of various religious groups in the West, the denomination or doctrine has not much significance from my viewpoint. No one will deny that there were important differences in

³ Hine (1980) provides a lively discussion on the communities on the frontier. Also see Turner (1920), Curti (1959), Billington (1966), and Sutter. My definition of the frontier is similar to Scheiber (1969, p. xviii).

⁴ Bolton (1921) and Bannon (1971) provide descriptions of the Spanish frontier. On the French frontier, see Trudel (1973) and Eccles (1968).

theology, ritual, and institution among, say, Presbyterians and Methodists. But I am concerned with an aspect of religious life which was not much influenced by these differences, deliberately ignoring the inner side of religious experiences. I do not intend to confine my argument to Protestant groups either. Frontier communities in the Midwest, the Mormon settlements in the arid West, and the Japanese immigrant communities on the West Coast will be examined in order to illustrate my point. It is true that the Japanese did not settle in the wilderness in the literal sense, but they built their communities in an extremely inhospitable environment.⁵

First, let us consider the case of Midwestern frontier. As mentioned before, frontier is the place where new communities are founded in the wilderness. Like the Puritans in provincial Massachusetts who could not afford to have fighting, the pioneer settlers in the Midwest had to cooperate with one another in order to survive. The figure of a lone frontiersman who hastened to leave his cabin when he saw smoke from a neighbor's clearing is largely a myth. Turner himself recognized that the frontier environment had sometimes necessitated cooperation among isolated pioneers. According to Turner, the Indian was a "consolidating agent" on the frontier. Since the Indian was a common danger, it demanded united action. Natural hazards such as prairie fires, grasshopper plagues, spring floods and summer droughts were common threat, which brought about joint action among settlers.⁶

Pioneering tasks such as cabin raising, prairie breaking, construction of roads and bridges also made cooperation necessary. It is said that neighbors would gather from miles around to build a settler's house or barn. Prairie breaking, the initial step in farm making, could not be handled by a solitary settler. Although the clearing of grassland required less labor and time than that of forest, the virgin sod was tough and six yoke of oxen with a special heavy plow was necessary. Since it was beyond the capacity of ordinary settlers, neighbors pooled their teams and resources to do the job. Harvesting and threshing were also the scene of cooperation. As time was the essential element in harvesting, pioneer farmers had to obtain enough helpers when the crop was ready to cut. In many cases, neighbors exchanged labor in harvest fields and in threshing operation. It is true that neighborhoods in the Midwest were measured in miles, but most settlers were not beyond traveling distance. Diaries of early settlers show that they thought nothing of driving eight or ten miles to a town or a neighbor's cabin.⁷

Public land policies bred cooperation among settlers who wanted to protect their claims. The preamble of the constitution of the squatters union in Lake County, Indiana, stated as follows: Whereas, the settlers upon the public lands

⁵ For a comprehensive treatment on religious history, see Ahlstrom (1972). Also, see Handy (1976) and Gaustad (1962).

⁶ Turner (1920, p. 15). The Puritans in provincial Massachusetts are treated in Zuckerman (1970). For further details, see Dick (1943) and Reid (1980).

⁷ For more detailed accounts, see Bogue (1963) and Fite (1966).

in this county, not having any certain prospect of having their rights and claims secured to them by a pre-emption law of Congress, and feeling the strong present necessity of their becoming united in such a manner as to guard against speculation upon our rights, have met and united together to maintain and support each other.⁸

At the same time, the economic characteristic of Midwestern agriculture gave rise to the need for a community. It is known that family farms and commercial agriculture characterized Midwestern farming in the nineteenth century. Although subsistence agriculture predominated in the beginning, frontier farms were not completely self-sufficing, and most of the pioneer farmers were commercially orientated. Even in the early stage of settlement, hogs and whiskey were sent to market in order to obtain scarce money which enabled pioneers to buy iron, glass, salt, and spices. The developing pattern of agricultural specialization in Illinois or Iowa reflected the growth of commercial farming. If pioneer farmers had continued to follow subsistence agriculture, specialization in wheat or livestock could not have emerged in the Middle West. It was suggested that western farmers had supported the War of 1812 as a result of their concern over the Mississippi trade of agricultural products.⁹

The earliest farms were naturally hindered from participating in fully commercialized agriculture because of the distance from the market. In order to accomplish the change from self-sufficiency to commercial production, Midwestern settlers should have access to the market. On the southern frontier where commercial production of cotton predominated, the situation was different from the Midwest. Southern planters could rely on the service of factors, or commission merchants, who handled the marketing of cotton and purchasing of goods for masters and slaves. The factors also advanced credit to planters and arranged for storage and insurance. Unlike great planters in the South, family farmers in the Midwest with much smaller scale of production had to devise their own scheme for marketing. What they needed were local trading centers to sell their products and obtain necessary goods and services. This demand ultimately gave birth to small towns and community centers which dotted the Middle West to serve local farmers. However, this process was neither automatic nor spontaneous. It was not the invisible hand but the conscious effort of local people that produced these centers.¹⁰

The rectangular survey system and settlement policies of the federal government precluded the formation of a nucleated village, and the scattering of isolated farmsteads became the rule in the Middle West. We know that town speculators

⁸ The constitution of the squatters union can be found in Keller (1936, vol. 1, pp. 69–76). Also see Bogue (1958).

⁹ The earlier phase of commercialization is described in Mitchell (1977). According to Faragher (1985, p. 245), self-sufficiency itself was achieved through community cooperation. Also see Bogue (1963), Danhof (1969), and Taylor (1969).

¹⁰ The difference between the South and the Midwest is discussed by North (1961). On the cotton planters, see Woodman (1968).

laid out numerous would-be towns, and local boosters made every effort to promote their plans. But, not every paper town became a reality. A county seat or a railroad station would certainly provide a center for a community, but there was always fierce struggle among competitors to obtain this valuable prize. A necessary step before the arrival of a courthouse or a railroad was the formation of a viable community. How was it possible for pioneer settlers to create a community in the wilderness? At the heart of the problem was the creation of voluntary association of people hitherto unknown to one another.¹¹

It is true that squatters' associations were created out of economic interests. The desire to protect life and property in the wilderness gave birth to vigilante committees and volunteer fire companies. But, it is hard to believe that economic interests alone produced community spirit which may have been inimical to market forces. Even the Granger and Populist movements, which were basically built on the economic necessity, needed something else to solidify isolated farmers. Cultural factors were important in the minds of revolting farmers.¹²

Recent studies pointed out the significance of family on the frontier. Family and kinship groups often migrated together, and intermarriage among neighbors strengthened the family ties. However, frontier communities were not always composed of siblings and relatives. Kinship furnished only a part of the basis of emerging communities, where inhabitants were mostly strangers from different localities. What, then, could have been the bonds that united heterogeneous population on the frontier where traditional structure of society was lacking?¹³

Along with families, settlers usually carried certain cultural baggage with them, the content of which helped them to create or re-create social organizations in the West. Although I used the word, "heterogeneous" population, most of the pioneer settlers in the Midwest shared similar cultural heritage. I am talking of political philosophy and religion which were probably found in their baggage. The political democracy was important in the initial stage of setting up a new community. As Elkins and McKittrick wrote, it was not a bright possibility but a brutal necessity. Since traditional authority was lacking and charismatic leadership not always available, people turned to democracy as a practical alternative to solve their problems. A wide participation in public affairs was surely conducive to the growth of voluntary commitment to the community. Yet, we still lack the core of that community.¹⁴

A general store or a tavern may have been a gathering place of settlers, but it could not provide the cement that joined people together. I would like to argue

¹¹ For a detailed treatment of rectangular survey system, see Johnson (1976). Also see Rohrbough (1968).

¹² Parsons (1973) and Goodwyn (1976) discuss various aspects of the populist movement.

¹³ Faragher (1986) stresses family and kinship networks. For further discussion, see Myres (1983) and Riley (1986).

¹⁴ An important contribution, though somewhat dated, is Elkins and McKittrick (1954). For a discussion of the political democracy, see Rohrbough (1978). Curti (1959) is a classic. Doyle (1978) examines the situation in a midwestern community.

that the church, whatever the denomination, was the most potent instrument for organizing frontier population. Contrary to popular tendency to equate frontier with Sabbath breaking, gambling, swearing and drinking, many of the westerners were religious people. The United States Census shows that not everyone was a churchgoer. But the situation was not very different in the East. The western settlers were often too impoverished to raise a church building or call a pastor to serve them. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm with which the Methodist circuit riders was received, and the large number of people who flocked to camp meetings did testify the thirst for religion among pioneers.¹⁵

The descriptions of camp meetings by travelers may induce us to believe that these revivals were not religious gatherings. After attending a camp meeting in Indiana, Frances Trollope wrote, "But how am I to describe the sounds that proceeded from this strange mass of human beings?... Hysterical sobbings, convulsive groans, shrieks and screams the most appalling, burst forth on all sides. I felt sick with horror." She was convinced that being at a camp meeting was like finding oneself within the gates of hell. But even this English lady recorded a moment at which she had perceived "the solemn and beautiful effect" of the woodland worship. No one would deny that camp meetings were social occasions as well. Nevertheless, spectacular sides which caught the eyes and ears of travelers have been overemphasized, and religious character forgotten. A picnic or a barbecue could hardly produce such emotional excitement as described by Mrs. Trollope.¹⁶

Religion, unlike politics, embraced all members of the family. It is said that women in the West remembered their religious duty better than men, but it is an overstatement that the frontier congregation was mostly feminine. Though religion may have been within the sphere of women, religious gatherings brought adults and children together. Western settlers were often unaware of their common religious beliefs in the world of hard work and isolation. By calling out isolated people into church fellowship, religion became an integrating and unifying force in the frontier society. A home missionary wrote that until the organization of his church, "so few families" had "known each other," as Christians even. It should not be considered as a mere boast that the people loved and appreciated the missionary who had brought them together.¹⁷

At the church meetings people not only enjoyed social opportunities but also recognized their shared moral and social values. They found that they were like-minded people, sharing something more than the prosaic connection of labor exchange or squatters' association. The organizational purpose of the church was the formation of religious fellowship among its members, even though there were differences in the style of organization among different denominations. As a result,

¹⁵ Buley (1950, vol. 2, pp. 417-488) provides a general description. Also see Johnson (1955). For a fresh approach, see Pritchard (1988).

¹⁶ Trollope (1927, pp. 137-145).

¹⁷ Muller (1979) provides an interesting account in this regard. Also see Jeffrey (1979).

it provided a means for hitherto complete strangers to establish close personal relations. The bonds of religious fellowship were probably stronger than those of economic interests or political loyalty, since they embraced mothers and daughters as well as fathers and sons. Thus the church, whether Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian, was able to create a solid core of people organized for religious purpose, upon which a secular community could be founded. A historian called it "the community of feeling", without which the creation of viable communities would be doomed to failure.¹⁸

It is true that religion not always brought peace and harmony to the frontier. The fierce competition among various denominations and theological controversy are well known. The temperance movement led by the clergy and women often brought opposition from merchants and saloon keepers. Nevertheless, the function of the church to provide the fellowship was undeniable. The door to the church was opened to all who would come—at least so far as white people was concerned. In spite of the rivalry among denominations, they sometimes cooperated in holding joint Thanksgiving or Christmas services. It was also permissible for a member of a church to attend the service of another church, though ministers would not encourage it. A diarist, who was a member of a Presbyterian church, recorded that she had often attended a morning service at her church and went to a Congregational church to hear another sermon on Sundays. Fund raising affairs were held from time to time by individual churches for various purposes, such as the construction or maintenance of church buildings. These church socials were usually open to all denominations. These joint efforts promoted a sense of community and fostered social cohesion. Voluntary associations also sprang up in what was a social desert. Sunday schools, Bible classes, temperance societies and various ladies groups served as the refuge from isolation and monotony as well as the path to Christian fellowship. Besides, churches in the Midwest were happy to welcome newly arrived migrants from the East. Newcomers were invited to a circle of potential friendship and business contracts, the significance of which was later noticed by Max Weber.¹⁹

Therefore, the establishment of a church was more important than the opening of a bank or the coming of the railroad. The church, moreover, was able to influence the personal and social behavior of people, which contributed to the maintenance of law and order on the frontier. Turner had already mentioned the efforts of the East to regulate the frontier through education and religion in his frontier essay. One of his students showed that the church, school, and town meeting had been three institutions characterizing New England settlements in the West. Another historian maintains that churches were the only guardians of the morals of frontier communities, and calls them "moral courts of the frontier." The preservation of order was certainly desirable for the inhabitants of newly

¹⁸ For further details, see Faragher (1986), Doyle (1978), and Rohrbough (1968).

¹⁹ In addition to Buley (1950), Doyle (1978), Jeffrey (1979), and Muller (1979), Wade (1959) should be consulted.

settled communities. But it was also important from the viewpoint of economic development of the West. Even in cattle towns noted for violence, according to Robert Dykstra, business leaders recognized that peace and order was prerequisite for economic growth. In another study of mining frontier, it is pointed out that churches provided a center for orderly life in mining towns, thus serving as a source of continuity of these places. We do not know whether camp meetings and circuit riders saved the West or not, but there is no doubt that religion helped frontier people to build their communities and paved the way for economic development. Of course, one can argue that Christianity paved the way for westward expansion by justifying the annihilation of the Indian culture. However, that is another story.²⁰

Now let us turn to the experience of the Mormons. The role of religion in community making process is clearly seen in the case of religious or quasi-religious colonies, and the westward migration of the Mormons was the most spectacular illustration. It may seem redundant to examine their experience, since it is self-evident that religion was the most important factor in the creation of the Great Basin Kingdom. The Mormon experience, nevertheless, is worth considering. They not only stood out most prominent in community building in the wilderness, but also created the most efficient method of water use in the arid West.²¹

It would be unnecessary to describe the background and eventual migration of the Mormons to Great Salt Lake. Under the harsh natural conditions where the amount of annual rainfall was insufficient for agriculture, the Mormons had to irrigate their crops if they were to succeed in pioneering. I have already mentioned the need for cooperation in the Midwest. In the arid West where irrigation was indispensable to successful agriculture, legendary individualistic frontiersmen could hardly survive. The Saints were frontiersmen, but they were united under the religious leadership of Brigham Young. The common faith facilitated cooperation among the Mormons, and they were ready to accept a new system of land and water distribution which was unknown in the humid East. They first received ten to forty acres of land depending on the size of their families. Considering the fact that western settlers usually obtained 160 acres of land under the Preemption or Homestead Laws, the amount of land distributed among the Mormon farmers seems to have been quite small. A quarter-section farm, however, did not fit the conditions of the arid region. It was too small for grazing purpose, and too big for irrigated farming. Since land itself was of but slight value without water, the Mormon system of land allotment was perfectly suited to the arid area.²²

The irrigation ditches were built by all who would use them, and each settler

²⁰ Turner (1920, pp. 35–36). Mathews (1909) and Sweet (1933) are classic arguments. Dykstra (1968) and Cochran (1980) provide modern interpretations.

²¹ See Arrington and Bitton (1979) for a comprehensive treatment.

²² For detailed accounts of the Mormon settlement, see Arrington (1958), Arrington and May (1975), Alexander (1983), and Bringhurst (1986). On public land policies, see Gates (1968) and Opie (1987).

was given the right to use water along with his land. The use of water was governed by rigid control of church leaders, which was crucial for the success of irrigation development. A bishop was appointed to be a water master for his ward to assure the equitable division of water. He designated the days and hours when each farmer could use water, and saw to it that everyone would receive just enough water for his crops. We should recall that most of the Mormon settlers had been born and raised in the East. They had had no experience of irrigation before they came to Great Salt Lake. As a matter of fact, they were the first Anglo-Saxons in the United States to practice irrigated farming. It is therefore remarkable that they were able to turn to a new type of agriculture with such swiftness and smoothness. The success of their system is shown by the fact that within a few years they produced enough food for the overland migrants to California.²³

The Mormon community had been already established before the migration. They were united economically as well as religiously while they were in Missouri and Illinois. Although the practice of polygamy did offend non-Mormons, the persecution was caused by economic factors as well. The Mormons, like other communistic groups, formed a powerful economic bloc, by trading almost entirely among themselves. In order to achieve religious independence, they devoted energy to assure economic self-sufficiency. Brigham Young later told his followers that they should not have any trade or commerce with the Gentile world. It is no wonder that some of the most prominent anti-Mormons were the merchants in the nearby area who saw the Mormons as an economic threat. This kind of economic solidarity, notwithstanding its unfortunate results in Missouri and Illinois, was essential for successful irrigation in the arid lands.²⁴

John Wesley Powell, Director of the United States Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region and the author of the famous report on the arid region, correctly recognized the wisdom of the Mormon system. While surveying the area, he learned that the Mormons had made use of streams for irrigation and had developed cooperative methods of building and maintaining irrigation works. In his report, he stressed the need for aggregated capital and cooperative labor if they were to redeem the arid lands. One of his plans was the formation of cooperative irrigation districts composed of farms of no more than eighty acres. In a detailed survey of the Great Salt Lake area, Powell's assistant wrote, "There is probably no other region . . . where the various problem relating to the most economic use of water will be solved so speedily." Disputes about water rights were one of the most difficult problems hindering the growth of settlement elsewhere. In this area, "the Mormon church is an institution which quietly, yet resistlessly, assumes the power to settle such disputes." We may agree with this writer, and conclude that the Mormon system was attended with great success and "the general welfare" was "immensely benefited."²⁵

²³ See Arrington (1958), Nelson (1952), and Unruh (1979).

²⁴ For further details, see Arrington and Bitton (1979).

²⁵ Powell (1962). Quotations are from pp. 142-3.

It should be emphasized that the Mormon church was not composed of American natives alone. Among the church members, the British, Scandinavian, French, Belgian, Dutch, and other foreign immigrants could be found. The role of religion is quite obvious in the assimilation of these diverse groups, all of whom contributed to the growth of settlement in Utah. The experience of the Mennonite colonies or Amana Society could also provide an example of religious communities on the frontier. But these were mainly ethnic colonies as well. The Mormon frontier may have been more Turnerian than others so far as the melting pot theory is concerned.²⁶

As mentioned above, the Mormons benefited other settlers who migrated to the arid region by demonstrating how to conquer the desert. It is true that religious collectivism was not practiced in the subsequent colonization of Colorado or Arizona, but the necessity of collective control of water was recognized by everyone. What was evident is that the most efficient use of water could not be left to individual pioneers. A system of social control with a new concept of water rights, different from the humid East, was necessary. The Mormons not only found a workable means of allotting water, but developed a new legal concept of water right which laid the basis of irrigation laws in the arid West. The economic prosperity might have been secondary to the Mormon pioneers. Nonetheless, it is beyond dispute that religious unity was the basis of their remarkable achievement.²⁷

Let us proceed to examine the role of religion in the Japanese American community in the West Coast. The Japanese immigrants were not frontiersmen in the Turnerian sense. However, their environment was so hostile that we may call them pioneers in the wilderness. The success story of the Japanese immigrants is well known and need not be repeated here. The reason for their success has been explained in various ways, but I would like to pay attention to the importance of community cooperation. It is said that not only individual thrift and hard work but community organization helped the Japanese immigrants to achieve economic success.²⁸

The Japanese were among the most highly organized of all immigrant groups, and the mutual assistance played a significant role in the early economic adjustments of the Japanese immigrants. They found employment, learned business, and obtained capital through community cooperation. Most of the newly arrived immigrants got their jobs through Japanese contractors or bosses. Although these bosses were often the target of criticism, it cannot be denied that newcomers without the knowledge of English needed the guidance of someone knowledgeable about the condition of labor market in the United States. The first employment was mainly unskilled work such as lumbering, railroading, fishing, and farming. But these jobs were stepping stones for better employment, and a number of

²⁶ On ethnic colonies, see Hine (1980) and Luebke (1983).

²⁷ For further discussion, see Pisani (1987).

²⁸ See Ichioka (1974) and Bonacich and Modell (1980).

immigrants attained the position of proprietors of small business with the help of fellow Japanese.²⁹

The fact that the types of business operated by the Japanese were concentrated in certain lines such as hotels, restaurants, barbershops, and groceries indicates the pattern of upward mobility of the Japanese immigrants. When a Japanese established himself, for example, as a restaurant owner, he helped other Japanese to learn his trade and get started. A popular form of raising capital for a new business was called "Tanomoshi-ko," which had been practiced in their home country. The main features of Tanomoshi-ko were the regular pooling of money by a group of people and the lending of the combined amount of money to each participant in rotation. A member of this club thus procured capital to start his business easier and less costly than borrowing from banks and other formal institutions. The use of communal ties was an important factor in the success of the Japanese immigrants. Then, what was the role of religion in the making of Japanese communities?

The formation of a Japanese community seems to have been easy given the solidarity of an ethnic group in a foreign land. Since most of the Japanese immigrants were Buddhists, the role of religion to strengthen the unity might be obvious. However, the story was not so simple.

First, we should note that Japan was internally dispersed at the time when early immigrants left their home. The solidarity we expect to find in an ethnic group was very strong among the immigrants from the same prefecture (Ken) in Japan. Although a prefecture is an administrative unit, it carries historical tradition as well. People from the same prefecture share a common dialect, common custom, and common prejudice against people from other prefectures even today. Therefore, the prefectural identity was very important at that time, and the Japanese immigrants felt the closest ties with people from the same prefecture. For instance, the members of the aforesaid Tanomoshi-ko usually belonged to the same prefectural association. These associations served as a link between individual immigrants and a larger ethnic community.³⁰

Second, Buddhism is different from Christianity in organizational principle. Buddhism in Japan is not organized around weekly meetings. People may visit Buddhist temples on special occasions, but the faith is usually expressed by everyday observance within a family. Besides, in the period of first Japanese migration to the United States, Buddhism was firmly embedded in the life of village communities in Japan, which were virtually closed to the outside world. Since it was the religion of a closely knit society, Buddhism lacked a desire and strategy to acquire new followings and organize its members. In contrast, Protestant Christianity, individualistic in doctrine, knew how to win new converts and how to organize the congregations. It is therefore not surprising that the earliest religious organization among the Japanese immigrants was not a Buddhist but a Christian

²⁹ Miyamoto (1972) provides a detailed study of a community.

³⁰ See Bonacich and Modell (1980) and Miyamoto (1972).

church.

Some of the Japanese immigrants were already Christian before their arrival, since American missionaries had been quite active in Meiji Japan. In San Francisco, a small number of Japanese Christians met together to study the Bible and learn English. A downstairs room for their meeting was offered in the Congregational Church at Powell Street, and the Gospel Society was formed in 1877, which was the first religious organization among the Japanese immigrants in America. Since the Buddhist association was not organized until 1898, Christian churches dominated the scene, spreading quickly to the young members of the Japanese. When revival meetings were held in 1887, it was reported that four hundred Japanese had been converted to the Christianity. By the early twentieth century, the number of Japanese mission churches had increased to more than thirty in California alone. The Christian churches in the West Coast had religious as well as social functions. They served as language schools, employment agencies, and social clubs for young immigrants. The affiliation with these churches implied the orientation toward Americanization, which was also a factor in economic advancement.³¹

Eventually Buddhist associations developed to serve the spiritual need of the Japanese immigrants, the majority of whom retained the ancestral faith. The first Buddhist organization was created in 1898, when two Buddhist priests from Japan visited San Francisco. Because of its organizational characteristic, it was not an easy task to create Buddhist associations in the United States. This difficulty and the fact that they had to be created as voluntary associations of Japanese immigrants, however, strengthen the bonds of fellowship among members. The effort of a small group of the faithful began to bear fruits in various places. Buddhist temples and cemeteries were built, and the number of Buddhist associations multiplied. The Japanese language schools were often attached to Buddhist associations, as the number of second generation children who could not read or write Japanese had been increased.³²

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism was an ethnic religion symbolizing a tie to their native land. It also had an effect to lessen the diversity among people from different prefectures. It is significant that Buddhist associations were organized locally and named San Francisco, Los Angeles, or Sacramento Buddhist associations. In contrast, prefectural associations always had such designations as Hiroshima or Okayama, Japanese place names from where the members had come. Instead of clinging to the old ties like prefectural associations, Buddhist organizations bred new fellowship based on the local communities in the United States. The membership in Buddhist organizations therefore reinforced the ethnic solidarity of the Japanese immigrants in each locality.

Along with the ancient regional tie furnished by prefectural associations, both

³¹ Nanka Nikkeijin Shogyo Kaigisho (1956), *Zaibei Nihonjinkai* (1940), and *Shin Nichibei Shinbun* (1961) provide description of various activities. All of them are in Japanese.

³² See *Zaibei Nihonjinkai* (1940, pp. 340–425).

Christian and Buddhist organizations strengthened the unity of Japanese community in the West Coast. This unity was an important factor in the achievement of economic success in the midst of prejudice and discrimination.

According to the classic argument, Protestantism set individuals free from the bond of community, and this process was a pre-condition for the growth of market economy. In the American West, in contrast, Protestants helped to build communities in the wilderness, which were essential for furthering economic development. Similarly, Mormonism and Buddhism helped pioneers in the West in spite of the difference in doctrine and outlook. Although I did not treat Catholicism, it must have played a similar role to unite immigrants from Ireland or Poland.

Perhaps I should have touched on the impact of the frontier on American religion. The doctrines and organizations of various denominations were no doubt influenced by the westward movement of population, and religious groups had to be adaptable to the changing environment of the frontier. It is well known that the Methodists and Baptists, both of which were highly emotional and had more flexible administrative organizations, grew rapidly in the West, while the Presbyterians and Congregationalists were less popular. Those who met the challenge of the frontier successfully were destined to become the dominant religious bodies in the nation. This experience probably made it possible for American religion to accommodate itself to industrialization and urbanization. American religious history would have been quite different had there been no frontier. But this will be a topic for another paper.

Keio University

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