

ISSUES FACED BY JAPANESE YOUTH TODAY

BY
RAYMOND D. MERCER

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INTRODUCTION

Societal Pressures in Japan

The youth in Tokyo today, are the product of an affluent and modern generation. By almost any standard they live a wealthy and privileged lifestyle. However, most people are unaware of the forces that are at work against this generation of youth in Japan. The enormous pressures which have been exerted on the Japanese family in recent generations have built up and are now affecting the present generation more than ever before.

The national aggrandizement of workaholism and the extremely long work-hours of the typical company employee in Japan have forced a virtual absence of the father in the home. This has not only enabled an amazing economy for such a small nation, it has also meant lack of parenting which has caused a crumbling in the foundations of the family unit.

School life is full of pressures in Japan. From an early age children learn that the university they get into will determine their success in life. The effect on Jr. High students is evident when their mothers display public shame because their child did not do well enough on an entrance exam for high school. Some children have already been labeled failures before puberty.

Bullying or *ijime* is a well known problem, making some students fear even attending school.

Often this behavior is overt and sometimes the teacher is involved as well. The scapegoat student, picked as “different” for whatever reason, has no recourse and no way of escaping daily verbal, mental, emotional, and sometimes even physical abuse.

Exam “Hell Week” in Jr. High and High School is, of course, well-known outside of Japan because of television and investigative journalism. The pressures of the vast educational system in Japan have not only caused many suicides, they have caused more and more young people to begin to rebel against traditional society. This rebellion does not always take the form of overt disobedience which can be seen in the Boso-zuku motorcycle gangs that roam city streets at night making as much noise as possible in obvious defiance of the cultural mandate of avoiding *kinjo-meiwaku* (neighborhood disturbance) at all costs.

Sometimes, the rebellion comes in more passive ways such as avoidance of responsibilities, retreating to one’s own room, and even – in many cases – retreating from reality altogether.

In recent years there have been some very shocking trends in the youth that seem to indicate that Japan may be on the verge of a real moral and cultural collapse. In this paper

I will examine four of these trends which have been documented as taking place among the youth of Japan in this generation. These trends appear extremely negative, and the experts of Japanese society have no answers. But because these are issues of the heart, they each represent an area where the church can shine the truth of the Gospel and offer real hope and answers.

FOUR TRENDS AMONG JAPANESE YOUTH

Parasite Singles

In the last few years a new class of young adult called “parasite single” has emerged in Japan and especially in the major cities including Tokyo. These teens and young adults have grown up in an affluent society and have not lacked training or opportunity. Yet more and more young people are electing to “drop out” of society all together. Some of these youth, who typically live with their parents and grandparents and do not go to school or pursue any kind of career, may be simply rebelling against the structured and high-pressure lifestyle of their fathers. But others seem to have deeper problems, difficult to fathom and rooted in some kind of spiritual bondage that the church must fight if they are to be freed.

In the 1980’s a new word was coined in Japan; the *fureeta*, which means essentially “free

part time worker”. Many youth, especially those who do not pass the rigorous college entrance exams required by popular universities, now decide that they do not care about advancing in their career. They find that they prefer to work low paying part-time jobs and have free time to do what they want. This type of attitude is revolutionary in a society where image and social status are obtained almost exclusively by what school you graduate from and what company hires you. According to *Imidas*, an annual Japanese-language publication that chronicles current trends and statistics in Japan, the number of *fureeta* in Japan ages 15 to 34 more than doubled from 1991 to 2001. In 1991 there was 10.1% of the work force who fit into the category of *fureeta*. In 2001 this figure rose to 21.2%.¹

There is another type of “Parasite Single” which is even more troubling than the *fureeta*.

There is a growing trend among young people today to simply lock themselves in their bedrooms and refuse to talk to anyone or go anywhere. Significant numbers of youth are refusing to go to school or to their job and are not only dropping out of society but of any contact with reality. This behavior has also prompted a new Japanese term: *hikikomori*.

Tim Larimer of TIME magazine did an article on this phenomenon in the August 21 edition titled “Staying In And Tuning Out.” An excerpt from this article shows the seriousness of

¹ Imidas 2004, “青少年と社会 (Youth and Society)”, page 1057.

the problem:

They are called *hikikomori*, or people who withdraw, like a turtle into its shell, and one psychologist estimates there are as many as 1 million in Japan. Like other behavioral disorders, their condition has not been discussed openly. They don't want anyone to know either, and if the parents do try to get help, the kids threaten to assault them or even commit suicide. So the parents keep quiet...

Some *hikikomori* live in isolation for years. Sadatsuga Kudo, director of a nonprofit center for hikikomori in the Tokyo suburb of Fussa, treated a young man who shut himself away for 19 years before he got help. Teenagers across the world go through angst, depression and withdrawal, to be sure. But in no other country does that condition appear so widespread – or so enduring. “You can't pinpoint the reasons,” says Kudo. “But you can pinpoint the context: it's Japan. Here, you have to be like other people, and if you aren't, you have a sense of loss, of shame. So you withdraw.” When you are different, Kudo contends, you take the logical step for self-preservation. You disappear.

Fantasy and Escapism

Many *hikikomori* spend all of their waking hours lost in a fantasy world of video games, animated movies called *anime*, or on the internet, interacting with others only through virtual personas. Even the older generation in Japan, and especially in large cities like Tokyo, has had an obvious addiction to fantasy and escapism. A favorite pastime of Japanese *salarymen* (company employees), for example, is reading *manga*. These thick comic books are almost an art-form in Japan and are often filled with violence, sensuality and perversion. There are *manga* for every age in Japan and it is a common site to see

people on crowded trains intensely reading and lost in the plot of their favorite *manga*, while the reality of being crushed into crowded commuter trains daily for hours at a time is blissfully ignored.

Another form of escape from a pressure filled existence is the Role Playing Game or *RPG* where players can assume the character of any type of creature he prefers, real or imaginary and get away with behavior which would never be tolerated in strict Japanese society.

RPGs are very popular in Tokyo and elsewhere in Japan. Most youth have a PlayStation and a computer with broadband internet connection and if the pressures of everyday life get too great, the temptation is to lock oneself away in his room and become *hikikomori*.

Violence and Death Fascination

One of the most frightening trends among Japanese youth is their fascination with violence and death. The suicide rate in Japan is epidemic. It is one of the highest suicide rates in any modern industrialized nation and is double that of the United States². In 2003 there was a suicide about every 15 minutes in Japan and there is no sign that the rising trend has

² J. Sean Curtin, "*Suicide in Japan: Part Eleven – Comparing International Rates of Suicide*" [document on-line]; available from http://www.glocom.org/special_topics/social_trends/20040818_trends_s79/; Internet; accessed 20 September 2004.

slowed since that point. Statistically, one is five times more likely to die by his own hand than by a traffic accident in Tokyo.

There are new types of suicide reported in the news media every year. Websites have been set up on the internet where those who are considering suicide can “meet” online and get information on various methods for ending one’s life. Recently a string of “internet suicide pact” deaths shocked Japan. The highest rate of suicide is among the older generation and health and economic worries are widely believed to be the main causes. But the number of suicides among the youth is growing at an alarming rate. According to a recent Asia Times article titled “Suicide also rises in the land of rising sun” the suicide rate for elementary and middle-school children in Japan rose 57.6% from 2001 to 2002.³

The high suicide rate is an indication of the growing sense of helplessness and lack of purpose in the youth of Japan. Another grim trend is violence among the very young.

Until recently, Japan has been noted for its lack of violent crime, even in the cities. In 1997, however, a 14-year old boy shocked the nation by cutting off the head of an 11-year old student and leaving it at the entrance gate to his school. Since that time violent incidents

³ J. Sean Curtin, Asia Times, “Suicide also rises in land of rising sun”, 28 July 2004 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/FG28Dh01.html>; Internet; accessed 14 August 2004.

among young students and *hikikomori* have occurred with startling regularity. A recent article by the Washington Post states:

Incidents of violence on school grounds have increased fivefold in Japan over the past decade to 29,300 in 2002, leading the national Mainichi newspaper to warn of Japanese schoolyards descending "into battlefields." Violence by younger children in particular has risen rapidly, with the number of minors under 14 processed for violent crime increasing 47 percent in 2003 from a year earlier. One study by a children's research institute found that as many as 30 percent of high school and middle school students had experienced sudden acts of rage at least once a month. In response to rising youth crime, Japan lowered the age for criminal prosecution in 2001 from 16 to 14 and might lower it further.⁴

Immorality

Along with the increasing violence and escapism in the youth, there is a rapidly growing immorality problem. For years, Japan has been the largest sex industry market for Asian women and Japanese men constitute the largest number of sex tourists in Asia.

Researchers at the University of Rhode Island website report this about Tokyo:

One 'sex zone' in Tokyo, only 0.34 sq. km., has 3,500 sex facilities: strip theaters, peep shows, 'soaplands,' 'lover's banks,' porno shops, telephone clubs, karaoke bars, clubs, etc.⁵

⁴ Anthony Faiola, Washington Post Foreign Service, "Youth Violence Has Japan Struggling For Answers", 9 August 2004 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A50678-2004Aug8.html>; Internet; accessed 20 September 2004.

⁵ The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women - Asia Pacific [website]; available at

The following is from a collection of facts on Japan at a website at

<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/japan.htm> called *Factbook on Global Sexual Exploitation*

under the heading "Japan". In 1998, Japan was the world's biggest producer of child pornography and Parliament recently refused to pass a law banning the production of child pornography, citing "business reasons."⁶ Until 1997, Tokyo and Nagano were the only areas in Japan where sex with children was not illegal.⁷ The legal age of consent for sex in Tokyo and Nagano is 13, not 18 like the rest of the country.⁸ With an environment like this and with parental examples like these, it is no wonder that there is currently widespread immorality among the youth of Tokyo!

Enjokosai, or *Enko* for short, which means "teenage girls' compensated dating" is a new word coined to describe the large number of teenage girls who are working for dating services, phone clubs or simply on their own, to offer prostitution services to older men.

<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/apmap.htm>; accessed on 20 September 2004.

⁶ Poona Antaseeda, End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes, "Expert urges global law to end child pornography on the Internet," Bangkok Post, 3 June 1998.

⁷ Joseph Coleman, *"Pornography Easy to Find in Japan,"* Associated Press, August 1997.

⁸ Tokyo's Youth Division spokesman, *"Tokyo cracks down on teenage prostitution 'clubs,'"* Reuters, 13 August 1997.

This behavior among young teenage girls may be an indicator of the spiritual condition of Japan. Fukutomi Mamoru has done detailed research among Jr. High and High School girls and found that reasons for engaging in this form of prostitution include being “too lazy to work”, the “trend to have brand-named goods”, and even that there “may be a certain glamour in being involved in *enjokosai*... *Enjokosai* has become fashionable.”⁹

These girls in Tokyo do not believe that it is wrong to prostitute themselves because they are living in a moral vacuum. As mentioned previously, this is caused by the impoverished spiritual condition of Japan. Idolatry and cultural relativism have sapped the conscience and life of this generation until they are in the same condition spiritually as the Church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:17, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

CONCLUSION

The Church can reach Japan

The culture of Japan is beautiful and has great significance in the eyes of God. The historical and religious forces carried forward as tradition and culture for millennia

⁹ Fukutomi Mamoru, Professor, Tokyo Gakugei University, “*An Analytical Study on the Causes of and Attitudes Toward ‘Enjo Kosai’ among Female High School Students in Japan,*” Pp. 75-76, Asian Women’s Fund, March 1997

combined with the family pressures discussed in the first part of this paper have created pressures that have pounded away at the youth of Japan. Although there is great spiritual darkness in Japan, there seems to be a significant new openness to the Gospel in this generation.

Relationship-based discipleship is opening a way for the Truth of the Word of God to reach young hearts in Japan. Our Every Nation churches in Japan are focusing on reaching the youth through campus ministry and evangelism. Even as I write this paper, I am preparing to speak to 70 high-school aged Japanese youth at a camp in Shizuoka and challenge them that they can beat these “giants” through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and become leaders to change their nation. Other churches are reaching the youth in Japan now through creative church-planting, like New Hope Churches from Hawaii. Still others have found a way to the youth through music and praise, like the Hillsong churches from Australia. Para-church movements like the Alpha Course are also reporting new levels of success among youth.

Japan is finally beginning to open up to change because the Lord has allowed the faulty foundations of the past to be destroyed. Centuries of spiritual bondage from the system of

ancestor worship created by Shinto and Buddhism have been eroding and are no longer as strong as they once were. In some ways this generation in Japan is a generation without a purpose and without hope, but God has said to them “In Me you have a future and a hope.”

This is a Key Generation

The previous four trends clearly indicate that there is a generation in Japan right now that has lost its purpose. The secular authorities and experts have no solutions for the gross darkness which has overtaken the youth of Japan. The promise of a rigorously structured life of service to the company and duty to society holds little attraction to the youth today because they have seen the spiritual emptiness of their parent’s lives. This has led to the unprecedented “dropping out” of an entire generation into a life of parasite singles, escapism, immorality, violence and even suicide.

None of this should be unexpected to Christians however. According to the Bible the end times before the return of our Lord will be dark and the enemy will do his best to destroy even the elect of God. But when deep darkness covers the earth, the Lord has promised to raise up the Church as His light in the earth. The following scripture can be seen as a prophetic picture of the church in Japan in the last days:

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD
rises upon you and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...

No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your
borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise..."¹⁰

The Bible promises that the Church will have answers for the problems in Japanese society today, and that the "nations will come to her light." This is the opportune time for Japan, the moment when there are felt needs that can be met by the Church. In this new generation of crisis, the church must redouble her efforts to reach the youth of Japan. Through a change in the youth, we can impact the entire family and bring an undeniable witness to the entire nation.

¹⁰ Isa. 60:1-3, 18

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