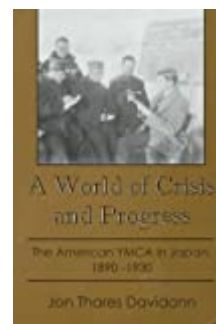


Jon Thares Davidann. *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan 1890-1930.* Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1998. 207 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-934223-43-0.



Reviewed by Sandra Katzman (Interac Co., Ltd)

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The beginning and the end

This history of the YMCA in Japan studies the moment American Christian outreach touched awakening Japanese youth. The generation spawned Christian leaders in both countries. The war of context is the Russo-Japanese War. It documents the turmoil of the inception of a foreign religion in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century, the change from racial to cultural imperialism, and the demise of missionary efforts due to financial troubles.

The six chapters are "The American YMCA and the Missionary Revival," "Japanese Christians and Cultural Nationalism," "The Struggle for Independence," "Social Problems and the Russo-Japanese War," "YMCA Postwar Imperialism in Korean and Manchuria," and "The Crisis of Christian Nationalism."

The first chapter discusses the revival of missionary zeal with the rallying calls, such as that predicted in *Christian Missions and Social Progress: A Sociological Study of Foreign Mission* by James S. Dennis: "Christianity could lead a nation by easy stages of progress out of comparative barbarism into the heritage of civilization" (p. 37). However, Davidann shows history to the con-

trary: "the nationalism of Japanese Christianity modified goals within the American YMCA" (p. 37).

The first missionaries came from the American YMCA to Japan in 1887, including John T. Swift, whose grave in Yokohama is tended today by Japanese Christians. His sensitivity to Japanese culture presaged resulting failures and many of the problems of the American YMCA in Japan.

Chapter Two traces the national discourse that linked *bushido* traditional samurai values with Christianity. Davidann unravels arguments that samurai converts reconstructed their social world. "The problem here," he writes, "is very simple: not all samurai Christians were on the losing side of the Meiji Restoration" (p. 58). Davidann's research seems to be complete and painstaking. He succeeds in writing coherently about the time from almost a century later using resources past and current.

Ebina Danjo in the keynote address at the Sixth Annual Summer School in 1894 said that the fervor in Japanese youth was "an awakening from out of the experience of religion which is profoundly ours!" (p. 69).

Nitobe Inazo wrote *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* and became famous internationally after its 1900 publication. The Warrior code of ethics in premodern Japan was described by the samurai of the Nambu clan who “had studied abroad, married an American, and distinguished himself as a scholar in colonial studies, agricultural economics, and literature. Nitobe was also a practicing Quaker who struggled with his conflicting loyalties between his faith and his nation like other Japanese Christians” (p. 72).

Chapter Three shows “the battle between Japanese Christians and American YMCA leaders in Japan” (p. 99). The Japanese independence movement—through summer schools, the membership rule, and local associations—“marked a grave failure for the American YMCA in Japan” (p. 99).

Chapter Four describes how Japanese used the YMCA as an instrument for war work in the Russo-Japanese war and also domestically to control the morals of Japanese youth. However, the Christian mission fell out of the YMCA during this time; Japan would not be a Christian nation. “Finally,” Davidonn writes, “as non-Christians in Japan revealed their willingness to use the model of YMCA work and to discard the Christian foundation for that work, or to create alternative organizations to strengthen the morals of Japan, it became harder to believe that Christianity could become the foundation of the Japanese nation” (p. 129).

The population of Tokyo grew, and there were estimates of up to 20,000 students in Tokyo who did not receive acceptance in an institution and became wanderers” (p. 101). The youth criticized society, but lacked the spiritual strength of constructive criticism. Facing the problems of the times, the YMCA changed focus in the United States and in Japan to address student problems and later labor unrest. “Consequently,” Davidonn notes, “the movement from evangelical Christianity to liberal Christianity with the YMCA in Japan was not necessarily a completely conscious decision” (p. 111). Only during the war effort of the comfort campaign in Manchuria does Davidonn see how “the nationalism of Japanese Christians and American Christians coincided instead of colliding” (p. 117). Buddhists noted the YMCA popularity in Manchuria, and “sent their own team to set up a comfort station in Dalny (Darien). There, the YMCA bragged, they attracted four times as many troops as the Buddhists” (p. 119).

The war was good for fund-raising of the YMCA in Japan. “Indeed,” Davidonn writes, “the war opened doors Christians in Japan could never have imagine un-

barred. The YMCA planned a financial canvass of prominent Japanese businessmen while the war was still going on” (p. 119). The Japanese government sponsored an all-religion conference of 1912 with leaders of Buddhism, Shintoism, and Christianity (p. 126).

Chapter Five makes two points. First, the Japanese YMCA in Korea manifested the same managerial impetus as the American YMCA had in Japan twenty years earlier. Davidonn diagnoses the reason of the imposition as “faith in progress” that “resulted in deeds that were most reprehensible” (p. 149). Secondly, nationalism held precedence over religion. YMCA missionaries “did not see themselves as representatives of a universal religion that could remain above the competition of nations” (p. 150).

Chapter Six concludes the book with surveys of the time giving the historical proof of failure that the mission had become less than coherent. “No longer,” Davidonn claims, “could one talk of the missionary watchword and be understood by all” (p. 151). The Rockefeller Foundation gave a preliminary report in 1930. Bewilderment and crisis haunted American Christians in mission work. The 1927 YMCA survey of missions identified problems in foreign works. “Cultural lag in modernization theory” (p. 154) assumed that native secretaries would be inferior to foreign secretaries, including having little financial sense. “The racial superiority of the 1890s became the cultural superiority of modernity in the 1930s,” Davidonn writes (p. 155). Japanese secretaries were blamed for failures. Leadership was changing in Japan. The first generation of Japanese Christians were dying. Davidonn concludes, “While the goal of making Christianity the moral foundation of Japan was never fully achieved, Japanese Christians had been quite successful in building a unique independent Christianity” (p. 161).

The book conveys reliability in its sources, which are published and manuscript writings from the times of its history. The author ends with World War I “Because of the dramatic nature of the shift in Japanese Christian ideals” (p. 162). The only weakness is a lack of smooth writing in one of the six chapters due to a necessary abundance of facts about postwar imperialism. The study “is an historical inquiry, not a linguistic analysis” (p. 27), and the author does not allow himself to be distracted in intercultural communication within history.

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