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Cooperation between Religious People and Social Actors during the Kumamoto Earthquake

Keishin INABA

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1. The Kumamoto Earthquakes, Five Years on from the Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami

On April 14 and 16, 2016, Kumamoto Prefecture, Oita Prefecture, and the Kyushu region were struck by a series of strong earthquakes that centered on the Kumamoto region. The main shock of the Kumamoto earthquakes, in the early morning of April 16, completely changed the situation in the affected areas of Kumamoto prefecture. Products disappeared from the shelves of convenience stores in Kumamoto City and many evacuation centers were left without food or water. Municipalities in Japan are required to establish multiple disaster response centers and develop systems for storage management and emergency supply inventories at designated evacuation centers. Unfortunately, however, such systems were not in place. During the initial response to the earthquakes, the unfortunate situation was that smaller loads of supplies, sent with the best of intentions from other regions, did not make it to the affected areas. The author requested 15,000 meals of instant rice from Tokyo and was able to acquire them for the Konkokyo Kiyama church (1,000 portions) and general gymnasium (7,000 portions) in Mashiki Town, and for the Kumamoto city in general (7,000 portions). Several days were required, however, for the supplies to arrive. On the other hand, emergency vehicles from Shimonoseki, Ube, Hakata, and Kurume loaded with supplies were heading to the disaster zone in quick succession. The circle of support among city residents broadened and there were even people bringing in supplies by private vehicles, separately from the support being provided by Japan's self-defense forces and similar actors.

The policy of the council of social welfare of Kumamoto City and Mashiki Town is to avoid the use of volunteers as a precaution against secondary damages. Organizations such as NGOs, as well as religious people, all acting at their own risk, were active on the ground. Social networking services (SNSs) demonstrated their importance by enabling the confirmation of the safety of individuals and the sharing of information about rescue and support activities.

Even when communications were down or congested during the disaster, people were able to connect to the internet via their smartphones. Supplies were delivered through communications via SNSs. There are examples of support coming in after SOS information was transmitted over the internet, and SNSs being utilized to redirect excess supplies to evacuation centers experiencing shortages. Children and senior citizens that had evacuated to a shrine in Kumamoto City initially

had no access to support, but SNSs were used to get supplies to them. The “*Mirai Kyousei Saigai Kyuuen Mappu*” (Disaster Rescue Map for Living Together in the Future)¹⁾, which is operated by the author, posted information on the disaster situation, individual safety and whereabouts, and aid efforts. On the other hand, protests and misinformation also spread over SNSs. Furthermore, the information gap that emerged between people who could use SNSs and those that could not became a problem. The effective functioning of two-way systems of this kind requires the participation of a large number of city residents. SNS literacy is essential in times of disaster and it can be said that since the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Japanese society has progressed in this regard.

2. Behavioral Guidelines Based on Lessons Learned from the Earthquake

“Disaster Prevention and Religion” credo (Behavioral Guidelines)

With the objectives of examining the initiatives of religious people and organizations in times of disaster and discussing future challenges in the field of disaster response, the public forum “Disaster Prevention and Religion” symposium was held in Sendai City on March 16, 2015 during the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. At the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” symposium, the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” proposal was adopted. The proposal details the role of religious actors in aspects such as disaster prevention initiatives, emergency response in disaster times, their roles during the restoration and recovery period, cooperation with governmental bodies, and the development of an open relationship with society. The three organizations that sponsored the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” symposium – the World Conference of Religions for Peace Japan, the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief, and the Miyagi Prefectural Religious Organization Liaison Council – formed the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” behavioral guidelines formulation committee and, based on the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” proposal, developed the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” credo (Behavioral Guidelines). The credo positions disaster prevention as part of the personal mission of religious people and sends a message of cooperation on life saving initiatives to various sectors of society including general citizen organizations and the government. The author participated in this activity in the capacity of a scholar of the sociology of religion.

The “Disaster Prevention and Religion” credo (Behavioral Guidelines) is made up of the following five aspects.

1. Learn about Disaster: Religious people and facilities shall provide a place for co-learning about disaster prevention and reducing the effects of disasters.
2. Prepare for Disaster: Religious people and facilities shall make preparations for living together in times of disaster.

3. Provide Support in Times of Disaster: Religious people and facilities will engage in the mutual support of life, without discrimination, in times of disaster.
4. Work Towards Disaster Recovery: Religious people and facilities will work together towards disaster recovery for the body and mind.
5. Expand the Circle of Cooperation: Religious people and facilities will work together with the public and private sectors to expand the circle of cooperation.

In the following discussion, each of the above aspects is considered in the context of the initiatives of religious people in the period between the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and the Kumamoto earthquakes, as well as during the time of the disaster.

[1. Learn about Disaster]

After the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, a large number of religious people and organizations organized training courses to increase disaster prevention awareness and workshops for learning how to operate evacuation centers. Many were open to the general public, thus becoming places for increasing citizen disaster prevention awareness. It is also the case that people who participated in such events were able to travel quickly to disaster areas to provide support.

A very common view in the areas affected by the Kumamoto earthquakes, however, was that "...while I thought Kumamoto was at risk of flood or water damage from typhoons I never thought that an earthquake would hit." Such an opinion was heard in the media, and also from the people of Kumamoto themselves when the author visited the scene of the earthquakes in 2016. The existence of the Futagawa-Hinagu fault zone that was the hypocenter of the earthquake was discovered approximately forty years ago and furthermore, the history of disasters in the Kumamoto region shows that there have been numerous earthquakes in the area²⁾.

Monuments to past disasters have been built on the grounds of religious facilities, and records concerning such events are contained in archives and other such documents. This was also the case for the Kumamoto earthquakes. As such, the transmission of a region's history of disasters is something that close attention should be to.

[2. Prepare for Disaster]

There is a growing awareness in Japanese society that, in order to develop disaster preparedness, there is a need to connect everyday initiatives and disaster prevention measures with regular efforts to develop diverse linkages. Since the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, there has been an increase in the number of religious institutions that have formed cooperation agreements on disaster management or developed collaborative relationships with Japanese municipalities and voluntary disaster prevention organizations.

A survey of disaster cooperation between local governments and religious facilities in Japan

that was carried out by the author in 2014 found that 95 local government bodies had a cooperation agreement on disaster management with religious institutions (of 399 religious facilities, 272 were designated evacuation centers) and 208 had a collaborative relationship without a formal agreement (of 2002 religious facilities 1831 were designated evacuation centers)³⁾. The Buddhist temple Jinsouji, of the Soto School of Zen Buddhism, which is located in Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture, for example, is a designated and disaster-ready evacuation center in cooperation with Takasaki City. Initiatives to store emergency supplies in religious institutions and carry out disaster training in accordance with both local characteristics and the terms of the religious facilities are progressing⁴⁾.

[3. Provide Support in Times of Disaster]

Religious facilities were also opened up as much as possible in the Kumamoto earthquakes for use as evacuation centers and centers for aid operations. At the same time, religious people carried out aid and support activities such as cooking and distributing food, distributing supplies, clearing rubble, and providing comfort in cooperation with local residents.

Kitaoka Shrine in Kasuga, Nishi Ward, Kumamoto City was damaged but was still used as an emergency evacuation center on the day of the main earthquake. This was a shrine that, in the year before the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, began local cooperation at the request of the local voluntary disaster prevention organization – that is, in response to the wishes of the local residents. This was, in other words, not a government-driven initiative but an example of local connectedness.

Buddhist support activities during the Kumamoto earthquakes are well known. They mainly consisted, however, of the provision of car parks at temples for people to sleep in cars. Evacuation center operations that included indoor accommodation made up only a small portion of the response. In addition to the fact that many temples were damaged in the earthquakes, another reason for this may have been that people were scared to stay indoors while the aftershocks were continuing.

There were temples that were already able to function as accommodation facilities due to the fact that they had halls where, during normal times, wakes and funeral services were held during the night. In addition, temples that had in the past acted as temporary evacuation centers during typhoons – inviting single senior citizens, acquaintances, and local residents – also became emergency evacuation centers.

Religious facilities with robust concrete buildings, such as those of the Shinnyo-en, Soka Gakkai, and Risshō Kōsei Kai, were also turned into emergency evacuation centers. Such facilities welcomed not only their believers but also the general public⁵⁾. In this way, we can say that the lessons of the Tohoku tsunami and earthquake were drawn upon.

[4. Work Towards Disaster Recovery]

People of religion provide comfort, a friendly ear, a watchful and attentive eye, and other kinds of psychological support to victims of disaster, all the while respecting their freedom of religion. In particular, during the Kumamoto earthquakes, the interfaith chaplains of the Kyushu branch of the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan (which had been founded before the disaster) carried out the friendly conversation and listening initiative Café de Monk in Mashiki Town in Kumamoto Prefecture, both at Grandmesse Kumamoto, a large exhibition center, and at the city's general gymnasium.

An interfaith chaplain is a person of religion who is fundamentally nonsectarian, does not engage in missionary work, and provides emotional/mental health care at hospitals and other public places to people suffering from grief and distress. The idea was developed based on the experience of the "Counseling Room for the Spirit" that was established by the Miyagi Prefectural Religious Organization Liaison Council to provide emotional/mental health care after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Education for interfaith chaplains began in 2012 with a donated training program for religious professionals at Tohoku University. Training organizations subsequently spread throughout other universities, with the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan being established in February 2016. In these ways people of religion continue to provide support and comfort based on the experiences of the past when working towards recovery from disaster.

3. Towards Cooperation during the Kumamoto Earthquakes

[5. Expand the Circle of Cooperation]

Various types of cooperation were observed in the support activities carried out during the Kumamoto earthquakes. The preparations for and experiences of past disasters (including the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami) emerged in the form of disaster support and relief efforts.

The Tenrikyo Disaster Rescue Team was involved in the operation of the Mashiki Town disaster volunteer center. In addition to the council of social welfare that operated the center, this team was a source of strength during the time, conducting support activities such as traffic management and house cleaning based on surveys of victims' needs.

The Kumamoto branch of Shinnyo-en Buddhism, located in Kengun, Higashi Ward, Kumamoto City became an emergency evacuation center. As there was no damage to the building which had access to water, communications, and power supplies, approximately fifty people, including non-members of Shinnyo-en, stayed there during the evacuation period even though it was not a designated evacuation center. As the Kumamoto City council of social welfare was to act as the base for support efforts in Higashi Ward, a request was made to the Shinnyo-en branch to allow the use of one hundred car parking spaces within its grounds for the establishment of a disaster

volunteer center. This was the first time that a council of social welfare had set up such a center within the facilities of a religious organization. Further, SeRV (the Shinnyo-en rescue volunteer group) carried out support activities at the center in collaboration with employees of the council of social welfare. The above is an example of the expansion of the circle of cooperation in times of disaster.

At the volunteer center, an operations team centered on the council of social welfare and the Joint Committee for Supporting and Coordinating Voluntary Disaster Relief Activities⁶⁾ talked to victims about their needs and matched activities to the volunteers that had gathered at the center. The matched work involved explaining to volunteers the tasks that needed to be carried out (such as the removal of debris or moving furniture from damaged houses) and then selecting volunteers to do the work. Next, a group leader would be selected, points to note about the activity would be conveyed to the volunteers, and required resources such as shovels, wheelbarrows, and helmets were distributed. The group would then proceed to the damaged house by automobile, bicycle, or on foot. Receiving reports when the volunteers returned and then making connections to the next steps were also important tasks.

On July 26, 2016, just over three months after the Kumamoto earthquakes, the Kumamoto Recovery Conference for Communication on Support by the Religious was held at the Kumamoto City International Center. The conference was comprised of the World Conference of Religions for Peace Japan, the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief, SeRV (Shinnyo-en rescue volunteer group), the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan, and the Kyushu branch of the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy, and was attended by sixty religious people who were involved in the Kumamoto recovery efforts. There was a variety of presentations at the conference, including one on the state of damaged shrines in the prefecture and challenges for recovery from a representative from the disciplinary board of the Kumamoto Prefectural branch of the Association of Shinto Shrines. Another presentation dealt with support activities at the time of the disaster and future support measures required of religious people from a minister from the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church, and another presentation on support measures for damaged temples from the secretary-general of the Japan Buddhist Federation.

Another example is the way that the Konkokyo Osaka Rescue Group built on their experience during the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami to swiftly move into action to provide rescue and support during the Kumamoto earthquakes. They distributed food at the Konkokyo Kiyama Church in Miyazono, Mashishi Town and, in collaboration with Osaka University graduate students who had been providing support in Mashiki Town, distributed food and opened a “friendly ear” café at a temporary house in the town.

In the above ways, it can be seen that part five of the “Disaster Prevention and Religion” credo – “Expand the Circle of Cooperation” – was, based on previous experiences, expressed in a variety

of forms of cooperation during and after the Kumamoto earthquakes.

4. Community Recovery and Emotional/Mental Health Care

In disaster-affected areas, there are some victims who struggle to raise their voices. It is here where both internal and external providers of support become involved. Such agents of support are diverse and include council of social welfare, community development councils, citizen groups, NGOs and NPOs, people from universities, and religious people. While they may all be working towards recovery, their efforts are based on a preconceived idea – that is, the reconstruction of the community. Is it really acceptable, however, to set the continuation of the original community or the recovery of the past community as the gold standard?

Community is what lies between the people affected by the disaster and governmental institutions that possess the function of being able to accept external aid and resources (Tanaka, 2007). When major disasters strike, however, communities themselves can be totally destroyed, and the community can be transformed in the process of moving from the previous residential area to the emergency evacuation center, to temporary housing, and then to disaster recovery housing.

In a changing community, where there is symbiosis there is also conflict. In other words, it is also possible that elements of the “dark side” of social capital such as isolationism, exclusion of outsiders, restrictions on individual freedom, and enforcement of norms can emerge in disaster-affected areas (Aldrich, 2015).

There are also differences in enthusiasm and commitment as well as disagreement and conflict around issues such as the issue concerning protective seawalls between people heading towards recovery, those trying to progress, and those that are at a standstill. In such situations, local religious people can become key actors through events such as festivals and recovery events, thus acting as facilitators for the community in order to bring people together. During the recovery process, people of religion sometimes take on feelings of sadness and regret that cannot be put into words.

While emotional and mental health care for the victims of major disasters has become an issue of social concern, the author points out the concept of “all-round care” - doing all one can, including mud and rubble removal, distributing meals, “doing the rounds” to see what needs doing, and generally helping out, et cetera in times of disaster. Such “all-round care” leads to emotional/mental health care and it should be emphasized that in times of disaster, “care which focuses solely on emotional and mental health aspects is simply not feasible” (Inaba, 2013:30).

What then of the activities of inter-faith chaplains in the disaster-affected areas? Based on their experience in the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, religious people from the above-mentioned Kyushu branch of the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy swiftly moved to engage in support

activities. While aftershocks were still hitting the region, they provided places for people to feel safe, travelled to badly affected areas, and prayed and mourned in their role as people of religion.

On the 13th of September 2016, five months after the Kumamoto earthquakes, a group of interfaith chaplains ran a “Café de Monk” at the Mashiki Town general gymnasium where 220 people had been living as evacuees. The author and graduate students from the research lab also participated in this activity.

At the Café de Monk, casual conversation took place over tea, coffee, juice, and snacks. There was also laughter. For disaster victims facing challenges living in evacuation centers and for those who have lost their homes to major disasters, the café could be thought of as a “companion in the course of living”

5. Conclusion

The challenges of the Kumamoto earthquakes were fully met through the distribution and stocking of supplies. It is an unfortunate fact that the lessons of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami could not be put into practice. As discussed above, in order to deal with times of disaster, municipalities must establish multiple centers and develop systems for storage management and emergency supply inventories at designated evacuation centers. Such systems, however, were not in place.

The author proposes the development, within local areas, of a cycle whereby stockpiles of water and food with expiry dates set one year apart are established at evacuation centers and religious facilities. When the expiry date for a stockpile nears, they would then be donated to a food bank or similar organization or consumed by local residents in a community event with a theme of disaster prevention. Another stockpile would then be purchased to replace the expired one.

Throughout the ages Japanese society has developed disaster preparedness through a variety of types of cooperation. This refers to not only the individual but also to mutual support on a local level. Thinking at a local, not just individual, level when stockpiling can create connections within the local community. No structure is perfect; what is important is for each and every person to make an effort. The experience of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and the Kumamoto earthquakes have made the support activities of religious actors even more visible in the public sphere. The “Disaster Preparedness” credo – that is, the five tenets of “Learn about Disaster,” “Prepare for Disaster,” “Provide Support in Times of Disaster,” “Work Towards Disaster Recovery,” and “Expand the Circle of Cooperation” – is slowly but surely expanding in its circle of practice. It is the author’s belief that the continuation of such a practice is of great importance.

In a major disaster people may lose their homes, families, jobs, and will to live. How can we

stand with and comfort such people? A wide variety of people including professionals and religious people are working in earnest, sometimes as if groping in the dark, to address this issue. We can be certain that “bonds of empathy” do exist within Japanese society. Further, we have endured the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and seen the emergence of the profession of interfaith chaplaincy. In the ongoing relationships between people of religion and victims of disasters, the victims, little by little, are able to put their thoughts into words. This kind of action is of a different dimension to the efficiencies of the “real world.” It could simply be that what is important is to pay attention, to continue our relationships, and to never forget.

At one disaster affected area, the author heard the term “virtuous outsider.” It came from the mouth of the mayor of City A. The term “outsider” can have negative connotations but in this case, it carries a positive meaning whereby the involvement of the outsider can transform the “dark side” of social capital. The cooperation of local religious people, people of religion who come from outside to offer aid and support, and the local residents themselves is important. Such cooperation can lead both to community recovery and the birth of new communities.

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Notes

This paper is based on the author's own field work and interview surveys with people in the stricken areas conducted in 2016.

- 1) Mirai Kyousei Saigai Kyuuen Mappu: <http://www.respect.osaka-u.ac.jp/map/> This is one of Japan's largest disaster support and prevention maps, aggregating data from evacuation centers and religious facilities to not only provide information on the location of such centers and facilities but to also enable residents to use their smartphones to transmit information, such as rescue requests, in times of disaster.
- 2) Refer to the following. Usami, Tatsuo; Ishii, Hisashi; Imamura, Takamasa; Takemura, Masayuki; Matsuura, Ritsko (eds.) (2013) *Nihon Higai Jishin Sōran [Comprehensive Survey of Earthquakes in Japan]* Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press; Shinoki, Takeshi (Supervisor) (2013) *Nihon no Shizensaigai [Natural Disasters of Japan]*. Tokyo: Nihonsenmontoshoshuppan.
- 3) Please refer to the following document for details regarding the actual state of collaboration between religious facilities and local government bodies. Japan Religion Coordinating Project

for Disaster Relief (2016) *Saigai Shien Handobukku: Shūkyōsha no Jissen to sono Kyōdō* [*Disaster Support Handbook: Practice and Collaboration for People of Religion*] pp.155-164.

- 4) In the areas affected by the Kumamoto earthquakes, a cooperation agreement on disaster management was formed with municipalities but limited to, among others, Uto City, Amakusa City, Hitoyoshi City, and Koshi City.
- 5) From the report of the 26th Information Sharing Meeting of the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief, held on May 1, 2016 at the Sanjō Conference Hall, University of Tokyo.
- 6) This is a network organization consisting of groups such as businesses, NPOs, social welfare councils and public funding groups. It was established after the 2004 Niigata Chuetsu earthquake with the Central Community Chest of Japan being established in January 2005.

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Abstract

Major disasters are a frequent occurrence within Japan and internationally. In April 2016, five years after the unprecedented disaster of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, the Kumamoto earthquake struck Japan. The response brought people together, creating new connections and solidarity. Examples include aid and support in times of disaster, reconstruction support, and activities that commemorate the disaster, as well as structures developed for self-help, cooperation, and aid provided by public bodies in preparation for the Tokai and Nankai megathrust earthquakes predicted to strike Japan in the future. It is clear that religious activities in the affected areas demonstrated strength as a type of local resource. Based on a discussion of the behavioral guidelines for “Disaster Prevention and Religion” (learn about disaster, prepare for disaster, provide support in times of disaster, work towards disaster recovery, and expand the circle of cooperation), this paper examines the responses of religious people to the Kumamoto earthquake.