

Spiritual Care in Japan after the Tsunami

GTU doctoral candidate Nathan Michon shares stories and insights from several years in Japan studying the rise in chaplaincy in the wake of the 2011 tsunami

By Nathan Michon

As a doctoral candidate in the GTU's Department of Historical and Cultural Studies in Religions, I have been based in Sendai, Japan, for most of my dissertation research. Unlike Tokyo, Osaka, or Kyoto, the city of Sendai isn't well known to most people in the United States. It is the largest city in northeastern Japan, a region that is more mountainous and sparsely populated overall—and it was the region hit by the large earthquake and tsunami eight years ago. I am here in Japan because of that event; my research explores the boom in chaplaincy and spiritual care that began in the wake of that tragedy, and the ways in which traditional spiritual practices are being adapted to meet contemporary needs.

The disaster occurred on March 11, 2011, and is widely known in Japan as “3.11.” Many in the United States are more familiar with the impact of the earthquake in Fukushima Prefecture, where nuclear reactors melted down, but the quake actually occurred just off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture, where Sendai is the capital. The earthquake was the largest ever known to strike Japan and the fourth largest in the history of seismology. People who lived through it have described to me the incredibly long and violent shaking, saying they thought the world was literally coming to an end in those moments.

It was an unspeakably awful tragedy, resulting in the loss of more than 18,000 lives and \$210 billion of damage. But the earthquake itself did relatively little damage.

Japan has some of the most strict building regulations in the world, and its structures held up well for an earthquake that size. It's estimated that 99 percent of the damage to both lives and property came from the tsunami that followed, an almost unheard of 120-foot wave that came three miles inland, taking out nearly everything in its path, then receding and returning multiple times. As British journalist Richard Lloyd Parry wrote in his account of the disaster, *Ghosts of the Tsunami*, “Only two forces can inflict greater damage than a tsunami: collision with an asteroid, or nuclear explosion.”

My work here has involved listening to the stories of survivors and those who cared for them. Their accounts are among both the most tragic and the most heart-warming stories I've ever had the chance to hear.

Prior to this event, there were some efforts to support chaplaincy training in Japan. The Christian-based Doshisha University began a program long ago. In addition, two ordained Christian professors (including GTU alumnus David Ito) worked with a Buddhist priest, Taniyama Yozo, to found a pastoral care training organization some years before the disaster. Another Buddhist priest named Oshita Daien founded the “Spiritual Care Workers Foundation.” Yet each of these efforts was relatively small and unknown.

Taniyama Yozo had previously lived in Sendai and felt



The author (right) with Rev. Fujio, a Zen priest who helped found a suicide prevention program and also leads meditation programs for the disabled at the local city office

called to return in the wake of the tragedy. He was one of the many clergy from various spiritual traditions who came from all over Japan to volunteer. Yet most were ill-equipped to deal with people who had suffered such deep trauma. Taniyama and others helped set up some emergency training programs to help teach volunteers how to properly listen and offer care. Among the most important aspects of such training was simply developing greater awareness about other faith traditions and learning to listen rather than preach.

Many of the clergy who came to help had never previously had much interaction with those outside of their own tradition, and they were trained more to talk than to listen. So they had a tendency to proselytize, even if unintentionally. Listening, though, is a critical art of chaplaincy and more of a skill than most originally assume.

One of the organizations started at that time was founded by a Zen priest named Kaneta Taio. From Northern Miyagi prefecture, his temple was swamped with requests for funerals, counseling, and other forms of help after the disaster. But he still wanted to do something outside of the temple directly with some of survivors. He began a travelling tea and conversation service called “Café de Monk.” The name was a play on words—the English

“My work here has involved listening to the stories of survivors and those who cared for them. Their accounts are among both the most tragic and the most heart-warming stories I’ve ever had the chance to hear.”

word *monk* could be pronounced “monku,” which means “to complain” in Japanese. The café was a place where volunteer monks offered to hear the daily accounts of those who were suffering after the disaster. They served cakes, snacks, tea, and coffee. Sometimes volunteers would be present to offer massages, fingernail painting, and a variety of other services. Most of the volunteers simply sat for light conversation with people. But if people wanted to share more personal stories or struggles, the priests were always prepared to listen.

As time went on, however, the volunteers and others began to recognize a longer-term need that was not directly related to the disaster. Japan has a rapidly aging population. By 2050, 40 percent of the population is expected to be over sixty-five. As Carl Becker states in his essay in *Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved*, “Never before in the history of humankind have 127 million people, the present population of Japan, lived in such a small land area, nor have so many people ever died in such a short time with so few people to care for them.”

Recognizing the ongoing need for trained chaplains in Japan, Tohoku University, the largest university in the region, helped organize more formal training and obtained funding to establish it as an annual program. From there,



Nathan Michon prays in front of Miyagi elementary school near the coast. After the tsunami, the school had 2 floors under water.

several other universities followed suit. By 2016, they founded the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan (SICJ), a parallel organization to the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) in the U.S. With nine universities and other organizations around Japan having developed training programs approved by the organization, they grew rather quickly as a certifying body. This year, they made another critical step, beginning a formal program to equip chaplaincy trainers.

There are still many challenges that face any development to chaplaincy in Japan. First is that very few in the overall population still understand what the position is. The position is still so unfamiliar to patients in a hospital or hospice, that it can sometimes make the care more difficult. Religion is sometimes viewed with suspicion in Japan, and some people are surprised by the presence of any clergy in a healthcare setting. Buddhist priests are often associated with funerals in Japan. So when a Buddhist priest enters the room, patients have occasionally responded with statements like “It’s too early!” or become depressed thinking the chaplain’s presence is a sign that doctors believe they are in the last stages. One priest even reported that he was denied entrance to the hospital by a security guard who said, “The morgue is that way.”

Another challenge is the very strict boundaries between religion and the state in Japan. Displays of religious

activity are forbidden within most public spaces. A church group, for example, could meet in a public park, but could be kicked out for doing a group prayer there. Japan has a strong socialized healthcare system, yet because of it, most hospitals are connected to the government as well. Thus, although chaplains can now volunteer in such facilities, they are far more restricted in what they can do compared to chaplains based in the United States. It is possible that such restrictions could change in the coming years as awareness spreads, but such national policy level changes will be the most difficult.

My coursework and training at the GTU in cooperation with the Institute of Buddhist Studies prepared me to follow not just the academic historical and socio-cultural elements of the rise in chaplaincy movement, but also the human sides of it. The Fulbright Fellowship I was awarded in 2018 enabled me to conduct research at Tohoku University and to travel to meet instructors associated with the Society for Interfaith Chaplaincy in Japan and other similar organizations, chronicling the stories of what inspired them to enter their current work and how each of them creatively adapts their care programming to their particular students’ needs and conditions. I was able to witness many of the chaplaincy trainings firsthand and also had opportunities to volunteer at places like Café de Monk. The Café still travels to places in northern Miyagi, but

it has inspired numerous offshoots around Japan as well, in other disaster zones as well as hospices and clinics.

New programs continue to develop as well. This past year, I witnessed the opening ceremony of the Shingon Buddhist priest Oshita Daien's "World Harmony Meditation Center" in Gifu Prefecture. There, they are now training "Clinical Meditation Teachers," who are trained in a mix of traditional chaplaincy listening, psychotherapy, and meditation practices applicable to clinical settings. The trainees include doctors, nurses, and social workers who are revolutionizing their respective fields in various ways.

Throughout the experience, I've witnessed many creative ways in which these religious leaders are taking contemporary healing practices and creatively combining them with their own traditions and cultural norms to help the local people in whatever ways they can. Hopefully, my own research in recording their journeys and practices will further the cross-cultural and interfaith understandings of working with and caring for different populations.

In Buddhism, the lotus is a symbol of awakening because its beauty grows despite the muddy waters it comes from. Nothing can erase the tragedy of 3.11, but I hope my work will show at least some of the beauty that emerged in its wake. ♦

Nathan Jishin Michon is a PhD candidate at the GTU in the Department of Historical and Cultural Studies in Religion. He is planning to defend his dissertation in March 2020. He is ordained both as an interfaith minister and a Shingon Buddhist priest. He is the editor of A THOUSAND HANDS: A GUIDEBOOK TO CARING FOR YOUR BUDDHIST COMMUNITY among other works.

GTU Upcoming Events

"The Challenge of Artificial Intelligence from Transhumanism and Teilhard de Chardin"

Fall CTNS Forum with Dr. Levi Checketts, hosted by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences

Tuesday, November 5, 7:00 pm

Dinner Board Room, 2400 Ridge Road, Berkeley

Religious Pluralism at the GTU

Town Hall Meeting for the GTU community

Tuesday, November 12, 12:30 pm

Dinner Board Room, 2400 Ridge Road, Berkeley

"Liberal Inclusion or Liberal Conversion? Islamophilia, Islamophobia, and Islamic Studies in Interreligious Contexts"

2019 Distinguished Faculty Lecture with Dr. Munir Jiwa, founding director of the Center for Islamic Studies

Tuesday, November 12, 6:30 pm

Pacific School of Religion Chapel, 1798 Scenic Avenue, Berkeley

"Beginning Again: Reflections on Art as Spiritual Practice"

Brown bag lunch with Deborah Haynes, hosted by the Center for the Arts & Religion

Friday, November 15, 12:00 pm

Doug Adams Gallery, 2465 Le Conte Avenue, Berkeley

"Self-Care in Anxious and Discouraging Times"

Panel discussion with keynote from Dr. Lily Stearns, hosted by the New College Berkeley

Saturday, November 23, 9:00 am

G202, 2407 Dana Street, Berkeley

Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) Visit with the Center for the Arts & Religion

Visit the "Divine Women, Divine Wisdom" exhibit with GTU/JST-SCU professor Thomas Cattoi

Wednesday, December 4, 4:30 pm

BAMPFA, 2155 Center Street, Berkeley

"From Rabbi to Trans Activist"

Jewish Roundtable with Abby Stein, hosted by the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion at PSR and the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies

Thursday, December 5, 6:00 pm

Pacific School of Religion Chapel, 1798 Scenic Ave., Berkeley

For more events, visit gtu.edu/events