

**Mike Culbert**

## Japan Looks at National Psyche

"I WANT TO say loudly 'yes,' " the Rev. Ichiro Saito said when we asked him last week if materialism is as big a challenge to Japan's spiritual consciousness as it has proved to be in the U.S.

The Rev. Saito, minister of the Yamato Christian Church (United Church of Christ in Japan), director of the Sakai Kanaoka Infant School, and counselor of the Nippon Christian Academy, is the tour leader accompanying the third Sakai-to-Berkeley student exchange here.

He is deeply concerned, he said, because the onrush of materialism, as thoroughly disrupting to national values and Japanese youth as it is here, "has reached a critical point."

The response to the substitution of deeply rooted values by a yen — no pun intended — for material well-being has come in various ways, essentially reflecting itself in a restless search by the young for new things to believe in.

At the same time, he confirmed, there is no united front by Japanese religious bodies—most noticeably the traditional Shinto religion, let alone the imported faiths of Buddhism and Christianity in their numerous sects and denominations—against the materialism of the age.

There is a superficiality to the Western-influenced changing mood of Japan, that tremendously advanced and "inscrutable" Oriental society which can never quite be pinned down in the Western mind as either a copycat nation or simply a bridge between East and West.

It involves, said the Rev. Saito, a glorification of the need to be "happy," a fetish on joy, reflected in TV spots and magazine commercials.



REV. ICHIRO SAITO

...materialism a challenge...

"Even furniture ads emphasize that 'this chair will make you happy' and things like that," said the Rev. Saito, who suggested such a continuing emphasis on the need for feeling happy may mirror some deep stirrings in the national soul which are not necessarily happy ones.

Even so, it is Japanese business and industry — which, like so much of Japanese society, are corporative group-family affairs — which are taking the lead in trying to plumb the depths of the Japanese psyche to see which way the country should go.

The president of Nippon Electric Co., for example, has embarked on a study to distinguish "quality civilization" from "quantity civilization," a search with which the Rev. Saito says he is in full agreement.

And the Fuji Bank, said the Rev. Saito, is attempting to link its investments in Asia with a sense of social awareness — insisting that any such investments go into something which will be of positive benefit to the people as a whole.

"These are beginnings. They are just beginning to talk, but it shows a reality of the search for seriousness at a time when 'be happy' is a prevailing surface kind of philosophy," he added.

The two young student leaders of this year's "sister city" delegation here also confirmed that a kind of combined nationalist-new religion whiplash is occurring in Japan, much but by no means all of it expressed in Sokkagakkai.

This is a religious-political movement at times bordering on fanaticism and which is so strong that it has become Japan's third largest political party (Komeito) and has a U. S. student branch based in Santa Monica called Students for a Third Civilization. A Sokkagakkai antecedent in the U.S. during World War II was once considered to be a fascist front.

Yoichi Hiraoka, an economics student, said he is impressed with the intelligence of his friends in Sokkagakkai, stressed the "true believer" aspect of these Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists in Japan, and is also impressed by the central idea they express — the need for personal change.

Uhei Sadoshima, an industrial engineering student with a considerable philosophical grasp, said such movements are expressions of "Japanese religion" perhaps in the formative process whose ultimately authoritarian trappings "may be inevitable."

So all three confirmed what we sometimes forget — the most "Western" industrialized society in the East is also a land of youthful turbulence and the probing of the national psyche in a time of change and accommodation in a world game of ever shifting emphasis.

The question there, as here, is how far change can or should go without overturning fundamental national values and philosophical first principles.