How Race Mattered: Kagawa Toyohiko in the United States

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The relationship of the Japanese Christian convert Kagawa Toyohiko (1888–1960) to the United States is worth reviewing for several reasons, both by historians of foreign relations and by historians of religion. One of the most internationally prominent Japanese in the 1930s, this evangelist, social reformer, labor and peasant union leader, and prolific author of 150 books became one of those comparatively rare examples in modern history where a convert to Christianity from a non-Christian nation had a significant influence on people in a predominantly Christian society.¹

The racial relations between Kagawa and the North Americans, both because of their tendency to "exoticize" him and in the mutual avoidance of racial issues offer some intriguing examples of the racial aspects of international history. While the vast majority of Americans held strong prejudices against Asians, there was and is also a tendency to exalt Asians as products of the "mysterious" East. Although this is a less noxious attitude than overt racism, it has the peculiar effect of dehumanizing by superhumanizing—putting an individual on a level where the complexity of his personality, with all its flaws and contradictions—can be ignored. Thus, instead of stereotypes of passive-aggressive coolies or unemotional robots, the Asian is also seen negatively as the ultracunning saboteur or, positively, especially among intellectuals, as the sage beyond reproach. It is the contention here that an element of this perverse aspect of racial relations not only contributed to Kagawa's fame in the West, and particularly the United States, but that it stood in the way of serious dialog on tremendous racial divisions between Japan and the United States. His popularity is also an interesting early example of the power of the mass media of the twentieth century to cultivate a foreign personality who might otherwise have escaped wide public attention.

Born in 1888 in Kobe to a mistress of the head of a samurai family from Shikoku, Kagawa was orphaned at the age of four, and sent back to be raised by the man's legal wife, who was less than enthusiastic

¹ I say "modern history" because many ancient and medieval Christians had considerable respect for "pagan" philosophies and values.
about this responsibility. Throughout his career, Kagawa referred to the alienation of his childhood as living "in a house without love," and psychologically this bitter experience partly explains the appeal of the refuge of Christianity. Kagawa converted to Christianity while still a teenager, under the influence of two Southern Presbyterian missionaries, Charles Logan and Harry W. Myers.

Kagawa took the Gospel injunction to help the poor so literally that at the age of 21 he moved to a small apartment in the slums in the Shinkawa district of Kobe and began to take in the homeless, insane, and alcoholics, who often slept on the mat next to him. (He describes holding the hand of a paroled murderer he had taken in when the man had nightmares.) He fed beggars, arranged for medical care, organized disposal of the dead (he claimed to have washed nineteen corpses in that first year), and started classes in basic subjects for the illiterate. He documented the experiences of his first five years in Hinmin shinri no kenkyū (The Psychology of the Poor), published in 1915, a pioneering sociological study of the situation among the poor in urban Japan. The long novel, Shisen o koete (Crossing the Death Line, 1920) gives a vivid account of life in the slums based on personal experience. This autobiographical story also describes a type of near-death or mystical experience when he was critically ill with tuberculosis, one that crystallized his resolve to serve the poor directly, without regard for personal safety or health. Conditions were comparable to those in the slums of underdeveloped nations today, if not worse, with thousands of impoverished people crowded into one- or two-story buildings in apartments that rented by the "mat," a three-by-six-foot area to accommodate a tatami. It was common for six people to rent a six-mat area. Kagawa himself rented a grand total of five mats worth and some kitchen space, with common toilets and a water hydrant serving at least twenty in the back. The narrow streets were often thick with mud and refuse. In a typical week in Kobe, there were thirty cases of typhoid officially reported under treatment, not to mention the diphtheria and smallpox, along with pneumonia, tuberculosis, and diseases like trachoma that were caused by poor sanitation. Whatever else Kagawa went on to accomplish, the sheer act of moving into such intimate contact with slum denizens was so unusual—whether considered folly or sainthood—that it was certain to attract attention. To move into this place was, in a literal sense, to cross a death line.

To understand Kagawa's popularity in the United States, it is first necessary to examine the historical and cultural situation that enhanced the appeal of his basic political and religious messages, and then con-

2. See, for example, "Health of Kobe," Japan Weekly Chronicle, 26 May 1921, 733.