

IMAOKA

By George M. Williams

Imaoka Shin'ichirō [pronounced *e•ma•o•kah shin•e•chi•rōw*] (b. April 11, 1881; d. September 16, 1988)--last Secretary of the American Unitarian Association's Japan Mission, last Secretary of the Japanese Unitarian Association, Imperial awards in education (1950, 1965), founder in 1948 of Kiitsu Kyokai ("Unity Church"; "Unitarian Church of Tokyo"), Japanese apostle of Free Religion, Emerson of Japan.

American and British Unitarians were invited by TOKUGAWA Yoshiakira (1863-1908) – who would have been the Shōgun had there not have been the Restoration of the Emperor – to bring their rational religion to Japan and by FUKUZAWA Yukichi (1835-1901) to help him transform Keiō college into a university. The AUA responded in 1887 by sending the Rev. Arthur May Knapp (1841–1921, serving from 1887-90). The AUA was able to use the Hayward Fund, recently available with the ending of the Unitarian Mission in India (see [Rammohun Roy](#), [Charles Dall](#), [Williams Adam](#)). KANDA Saichirō (b.1863-d.1944) and the Rev. Clay MacCauley (b.1843–d.1925, who served from 1889-1900 and 1909-1919) and “three religiously-liberal” professors of law, literature and economics joined Knapp at Keiō, believing for a time that it had become a Unitarian institution. A British minister, Henry Warburton Hawkes (1843-1917), financed himself, serving from 1889-91) and focused on connecting with Buddhist delegates returning from the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and Buddhist reformers. When Knapp resigned, the Rev. William Irvin Lawrence (who served from 1891-1895) replaced him. Lawrence would start the work that became the Mission's School for Advanced Learning, drawing most of its students from conservative Christian missions, students wanting the freedom to question and learn liberal theology. Most would have to return to their former denominations, thus liberalizing them, as the AUA did not have funds for churches or preaching stations beyond Tokyo.

It was to this Mission that IMAOKA Shin'ichirō came in 1910, having converted as an Anglican from Pure Land Buddhism and then being ordained into EBINA Danjō's indigenous, lay-led branch of the Congregationalist Mission. IMAOKA, the first Christian graduate from the Imperial University in Tokyo, pastored three years in Kobe before returning to graduate work with his academic mentor, Buddhist Prof. ANESAKI Masahiro (1873–1949), a former lecturer at the Unitarian Mission's School of Advanced Learning. IMAOKA became ANESAKI's

assistant and went with him to Harvard, studying there during 1915 and 1916. His early return to Japan was a personal crisis.

The accomplishments of the AUA Japanese Mission are intertwined with IMAOKA's. He was part of the second generation of Japanese Unitarians and Japanese sympathizers. Thus, he worked with some of that era's leading innovators and activists. One of the most prominent sympathizers was his academic mentor, Prof. ANESAKI, soon becoming called the "Father of the Academic Study of Japanese Religion." Yet IMAOKA was most deeply involved with ANESAKI's work in interfaith cooperation and moral education. IMAOKA had the ability to lose himself in working for liberal causes with leaders and founders of liberal and radical movements that met at the Unitarian Mission's Unity Hall, "the most dangerous place in the Empire." Imaoka was known to serve "egolessly" behind leaders of the Japanese movements for peace, pacifism and internationalism when just involvement was considered traitorous. He also invisibly served in the Association Concordia (the first Kiitsu Kyokai), which focused on international understanding and searched for the unity of religion. He assisted Unitarian leaders who founded these movements: labor, women's rights (championed by his wife, IMAOKA Utayo), social democracy and Christian socialism, liberal Christian education, ethical culture, the League of Nations, and the first political parties of the Empire (Liberal, Peace, and Socialist).

IMAOKA began at the Unitarian Mission as an assistant editor and writer for Japan's most academic religious journal, which went through a series of mergers and names: *The Unitarian*, *Religion*, and finally *Cosmos*. He worked in every one of the aforementioned movements, most notably on international and interfaith cooperation with ANESAKI, on peace and Christian socialism with ABE Isoo (1865-1949; father of sociology, and of sexology), and on labor relations and economic equality with SUZUKI Bunji (1885-1946; father of labor movement in Japan) at the same time that he served as Secretary of the AUA's Japan Mission and of the Japanese Unitarian Association from 1910-1917. In 1917 IMAOKA became chief officer of both organizations, the JUM and the JUA, when SUZUKI was asked to resign. The AUA believed it was best for the Mission to be distanced from SUZUKI and his labor movement.

When the AUA sent the Rev. John B. W. Day (1874-1957) to replace MacCauley in 1919 the Japan Unitarian Association was a dynamic movement, sustained by its non-salaried professor-ministers. Day had orders from the AUA to distance itself from Suzuki and his labor movement and to remove them from Unity Hall. Boston's fears connected labor unrest with [bolshevism](#), while Japanese Unitarianism connected Christian socialism with the religion of Jesus. *Cosmos*

(*Rikugo zasshi*) had become the main proponent of liberal “sermon-on-the-mount-Christianity.” The heavy emphasis on social ethics was seen by Boston as “ethical culture,” which was highly objectionable.

The AUA saw three things wrong with their Mission: its championing Christian socialism in its publications, having the Japanese labor movement headquartered in Unity Hall under SUZUKI, and harboring an ethical culture movement with ex-Buddhists or New Buddhists in leadership roles. They sent the Rev. John B. W. Day (1874-1957, serving from 1919-1922) to force MacCauley to retire, to force Suzuki and the labor movement out of Unity Hall, to end the *Unitarian* journal, and to make Japanese Unitarianism more ecclesiastical according to a New England model. He accomplished all but the last and killing the Japanese Unitarian movement in the process. IMAOKA as Secretary of the Mission and of the Japan Unitarian Association drafted the Japan Unitarian Association’s letter to the AUA, signed by some of the Unitarian luminaries of Japan’s great universities telling Boston to end the AUA Mission in Japan. The AUA left but also sold Unity Hall with the result that the gathering place of the most progressive movements in the Empire was lost. Within a year Unitarianism ceased except as a philosophy of freedom. And then its dream of freedom was dissociated from its origin. None of these great professors continued to use the term “Unitarian” for the vision they continued to pursue or to write about its history.

IMAOKA and the great minister-professors (ABE, KISHIMOTO Hideo, UCHIGASAKI Sakusaburo, *et al*) went into education; SUZUKI into the labor movement; KANDA into banking; others into politics with some national success--HOSHIJIMA as speaker of the parliament, NAGAI as minister of state and member of parliament. They were active in all the progressive movements, but without their journal and a meeting place at Unity Hall they became easy prey for the rising militarism of the 1920s.

IMAOKA taught Christian history and literature (text-critical study) at Nihon University and then chose to become principal of Seisoku Academy, the Eton of Japan. He instituted a type of liberal education in his effort to modernize Japanese education, based on liberal values that he had studied with ANESAKI and what had been fermented at the Empire’s most dangerous meeting place, Unity Hall. Decades later, IMAOKA would be given his first of two Imperial awards in education in 1950 and in 1965.

In 1948 the Rev. John Nichols Booth (1912-2010) visited Japan for the AUA and found IMAOKA and AKASHI Shigetarō (1872-1949), senior Universalist minister.

The Japan Free Religious Association (JRFA) was formed on October 17, 1948, achieving a partial union of Unitarian and Universalist movements in Japan, a goal going back to a recommendation by Rudolf Otto when he visited Japan in 1912. The Japan Free Religious Association would join The International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom in 1965. Eventually its name was shortened to International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), less Christocentric so other liberal religious groups could join--especially those that IMAOKA brought with him to the international organization. Rissho Koseikai would join IARF in 1969. IMAOKA tried until his death to get IARF to change its name and adopt the purpose of promoting Free Religion, rather than just religious freedom. His last attempt was at the Tokyo Congress of IARF in 1984.

Meadville Lombard Theological School awarded IMAOKA an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1977. He was presented with the Distinguished Founders Award from the World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1979. Over 100 of his essays were published by the Japan Free Religious Association for his 100th birthday. Imaoka's life and theology provide a way of understanding the intermingling of the liberal religious spirit with Japanese culture, suggesting to many that he was the Emerson of Japan, the apostle of Free Religion. He died at 107 on April 11, 1988.

Shortly after his death, Kiitsu Kyokai, the "Unitarian Church of Tokyo," ceased to exist as his successor, KONNO Yoshitugu, became too ill to gather the fellowship. Yet, because of his writings his influence continues.

There is only one book in English related to the first generation of Japanese Unitarians: Michel Mohr's *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). A small booklet was written by George M. Williams, *Liberal Religious Reformation in Japan* (Brooklyn: American Chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom, 1984). Both are based on MacCauley's letters, reports and publications. Williams interviewed IMAOKA during visits from 1981-88. Mohr mentions IMAOKA's role in the closing of the Mission.



Imaoka Shinichirō and Imaoka Utayo, 1955



Dr. Imaoka and George M. Williams, 1980