

# Religion and politics; hopes and disappointments – Japan Times

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BY [DAVID HOWELL](#)

LONDON – Believe it or not, I have been writing columns for The Japan Times for more than 30 years. Often I have uttered quite controversial views about the world that a tolerant editor has kindly carried — my hope being to get some reaction from readers and provoke a good debate.

I have to confess almost total failure in this regard. Despite having seen around 500 articles published, the feedback has been minimal — except in one notable case.

This was when I rashly criticized bishops of the Anglican Church for treading too far into politics — I think it was in the early 1990s during a British general election. For some reason this sparked a real furor throughout Japan and a veritable flood of responses. I do not know how many Anglicans there are in Japan, but it seemed a great many, all of them writing to denounce my views and saying that, on the contrary, the views of religious leaders on political issues were most welcome, and a lot more valuable than those of many politicians.

Well, here we go again. The archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, head of the Anglican Church of 100 million souls, has been plunging boldly into political issues recently, but this time I am going to take a different line. In this totally altered world in which we now live, and in times such as these when all the old verities are under attack, moral bearings have been lost, no one knows whether news is true or false, uncertainty prevails and ordered government almost everywhere is under challenge, I welcome the voices of all thoughtful people, whatever their status. And if they can couch those views in ways that get reported and spark intelligent debate, so much the better.

Welby is certainly thoughtful, and coming from a business background in the oil industry, also well-informed about practical everyday issues. And he has certainly succeeded in getting his views reported by airing them in left-inclined forums.

But now I am going to sound less enthusiastic about his outspoken and very political views. What a confused, and quite frightened, world needs from spiritual leaders is some really deep analysis of present anxieties and fears, and a really deep understanding and explanation of what is actually happening to people and societies.

Notably, there is the overshadowing and puzzling paradox that in an age of total, intense and continuous communication, along with massive information overload, people feel lonely and disconnected. It is getting ever harder to know what to believe or in which direction life is going or what kind of world our children should be prepared for. All the old debates, between freedom and order, between the state and the individual, collective planning versus the market, have lost their relevance as technology, which knows no right or left in ideological terms, marches forward reshaping everyone's lives.

This is where some good unbiased guidance on the near future, and on the everyday struggles of ordinary people in their billions, would be very welcome. How are enough resources going to be 1) generated and 2) shared and spread, to ease daily pressures on every family, provide occupations for all and make the space available for all the natural human instincts of mutual care and concern to come fully into play?

In the new age of microchip dominance there are some fascinating and hopeful possibilities opening up. These include new methods of ensuring that new wealth goes into every pocket, not just those of the “fat cat” few; that reformed capitalism and markets, which now underpin almost every global economic model (even the Chinese) work for all; that democracy can take new shapes and shake off its tarnished image through the agencies of such things as blockchain instant linkages between millions; that every single child on Earth can get a good and tailored education; that love of one’s own country can be successfully woven together with networked cooperation across the planet; and much more besides.

But, alas, instead of lifting our hopes and opening our minds on this new world unfolding, the archbishop chose to drag us back into the left-right arguments and the philosophical quagmires of the 19th and 20th centuries. Capitalism, in his eyes, had lost contact with moral foundations, taxes were to be raised, inequalities flattened by state action, wealth creation (and by implication innovation and enterprise) discouraged, flexible job patterns destroyed, the power of trades unions, which in its old form brought the United Kingdom to its knees back in the 1970s, to be resurrected.

Generally this was the old socialist agenda, which has proved so damaging and hurtful, when a new kind of social democracy is both required and maybe possible in ways not available in the past.

Of course, there are plenty of today’s evils to overcome, many of them springing from weakened governments, new giant monopolies defying any nation, fake news, twisted versions of Islam, which should really be a peaceable ally to other religions (how are we going to achieve that?), nuclear weapons, the wild west of cyberspace and the toxic tone of political debate, with courtesy and good manners (the essence of a stable society) swept aside.

So there is plenty for elected politicians and party activists on which to focus. From the spiritual side, and from church and faith leaders, we need the added, and vital, ingredient of perception, wisdom and illumination of the dark scene and a bit of cheer about the hidden future and its possibilities.

On this occasion that was not forthcoming. One lives in hope.

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