

On Religion and Morality: Shibusawa Ei'ichi's Writings in connection with
Kiitsu Association (“The Association Concordia”)

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At the Outset

True to his nickname, “Father of Japanese capitalism,” it is said that Shibusawa Ei'ichi (1840-1931) was involved in over 500 commercial enterprises in his lifetime. However, on becoming a septuagenarian in June 1909, Shibusawa retires from some 60 companies in which he held executive positions. Further, on the occasion of turning 77 in 1916, he resigns as president of the Dai-Ichi Bank, after which he concentrates his energies on social work projects, movements spreading morality and private-level diplomacy (¹).

The time when entrepreneur-Shibusawa pulled out from the front line of economic affairs in which he was engaged for many years, namely the period from the Russo-Japanese War to the First World War, also marks an epoch in the history of Japanese thought. In other words, the conduct of the long-drawn Russo-Japanese War not only depleted national finance, but, city-centered civilian riots, or governmental response to the developments in labor movement and socialist thought also became pressing issues of the

¹ Tsuchiya, Takao *Shibusawa Ei'ichi*, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1989

times. Besides, foreign diplomacy centering on relations with the U.S.A. too deteriorated.

Reinforcement of “National Morality” was thus set forth as an ideology to rectify those developments. For instance, the *Boshin Shōsho* Imperial rescript was issued in October 1908 by the government that found itself wanting by the Imperial Rescript on Education alone (²). Moreover, in February 1912, this time spearheaded by the bureaucracy at Home, the *Sankyō Kaidō* (Three Religions Congress) was held. Although this Congress brought together members of Buddhism, Shinto and Christianity on a single platform, the mass media and intelligentsia spoke out against it as violating the freedom to practice religious faiths and decried the government of exploiting religion and morality (³). On June 20th, when the debate for or against the Congress resolutions seemed to converge, an organization christened “*Kiitsu Kyōkai*” (The Association Concordia) came into existence. If one were to say that the earlier Three Religions Congress was at the initiative of the bureaucracy, the latter was led on a private-level, and as one among its core members, is found the name of Shibusawa Ei’ichi.

This report examines the connection between The Association Concordia,

² Kenjo, Teiji “Kindai shōchoku no naka no Boshin Shōsho (The Boshin Imperial Rescript Amongst Modern Imperial Rescripts and Edicts)”, *Tennōsei kokka no tōgō to shihai*, Bunrikaku, 1992

³ Dohi, Akio “Sankyō Kaidō”, *Kirisuto-kyō shakai mondai kenkyū*, Vol. 14 & 15, 1969

which began its activities in the 1910s and Shibusawa Ei'ichi. It also takes up the topic of peering into something of the ideas on religion and morality cherished by Shibusawa – the man who committed so much of his energies to social work activities and the spreading of morality late in his career (*Rongo to soroban*, 1916; *Rongo kōgi*, 1925).

1, Inception of The Association Concordia and Its Activities

It is found that the inception of The Association was upon a proposal given by the Head of Japan Girls' College, Naruse Jinzō and his discussion with Shibusawa Ei'ichi and industrialist, Morimura Ichizaemon, in the summer of year 1911(⁴). Further, on April 11th the following year (1912), Shibusawa sent a letter of invitation with an objective to hold a meeting for a “way to better changes in current trends of thought,” at which 8 intellectuals gathered. Their names are, Naruse, Shibusawa, philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō, moral philosopher Nakajima Rikizō, political scientist Ukita Kazutami, litterateur Ueda Bin, religionist Anesaki Masaharu and scholar of Christianity, Sidney L. Gulick. The following consensus was

⁴ For details regarding The Association Concordia, refer Nakajima, Kuni “Kiitsu kyōkai shōkō (1) & (2)”, *Journal of Japan Womens' University*, No. 35, 36, 1986; For a primary source of related bibliographic materials, refer *Shibusawa Ei'ichi denki shiryō*, Vol. 46, 1962; Unless stated otherwise, all materials concerning the Association referred to in this paper are citations from Vol. 46 of the *Denki Shiryō* Memoirs

obtained on that occasion. "There is a sense of distance felt between the Orient and the Occident in contemporary civilization. Besides, different sorts of social movements, or religion, morality, economy, education and politics, etc. that form the elements of civilization, are drawing closer to each other. In view of such current times, there is a necessity for contemporary civilizations to illuminate a fundamental oneness, especially among the ideals of different religious faiths." Subsequently, after holding 2 preliminary sittings, The Association Concordia was inaugurated on June 20th the same year, under the auspices of 12 people.

Its objective is expressed in article 1 of the statutory rules: "The aim of The Association, set in the light of the general tendency in the world towards a concord (*kiitsu*) in the inner spiritual world, is to undertake research on it, support it, and by forming a sound ideology, thus contribute to the civilization of the country." And in its Prospectus, the following general idea is outlined: "Although developments preceding Meiji Restoration have been successful in making for provisions on the surface, there exists an immaturity of spirit in reality, though. In order to overcome it, The Association proposes to bring together leaders of different disciplines, build upon research and cultivation of the minds, and plan a spiritual unification within the country first. And by gradually rallying

like-minded people from foreign countries, The Association wishes to lay the foundation for a collective spirit for future civilizations”...so on and so forth. In other words, The Association was formed with an intention to overcome the confusion accompanying Japan’s modernization, by way of accomplishing a “concord (*kiitsu*) in the inner spiritual world.”

Subsequently, The Association assembled each month with some 20-odd members heaping arguments over 4 issues that were held up as “items of research interest.” Namely, ① Matters of Religious Faith; ② Customs and Mores; ③ Social, Economic and Political Matters (seen from a spiritual angle); ④ International and Humanitarian Issues (⁵).

It may be noticed that its distinctive feature lay, in giving enthusiastic consideration to even those issues of dispute on which seeing eye-to-eye was rather difficult, and, in the general anticipation to find points of commonality and accord. Although at the inception there were only 36 members, but by 1915 the number exceeded to 130, heralding the golden period of The Association (it was disbanded in 1942, though).

The Association also set up committees to deal with specific issues. One among them was the “Committee on Faith” that was formed in response to some queries thrown by Shibusawa in March 1914. They were “Firstly, do

⁵ “*Kiitsu Kyōkai no setsuritsu* (Establishment of The Association Concordia)”, *Ryūmon Zasshi*, July 1912 (*Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 429)

economy and morality coincide? Secondly, why hasn't only moral phenomena progressed? Thirdly, to what extent can education solely improve man's nature?" A written resolution towards its formation was made public in April the following year (1915). But as reaching a consensus seemed difficult to achieve, the discussion was rounded off by a rather obvious remark like, "Religious faith sprouts quite naturally in the hearts of people receiving education. But, precautions should be taken so as not to hamper the development of faith, due to the negligence and contempt on the part of educators shown towards such a development (6)."

On the other hand, close on the heels of a lecture entitled "Conviction of the Nation's Citizens in Response to the Current Situation" delivered by Shibusawa, a "Research Committee on Issues Concerning the Current Situation" was set up, and a "Manifesto" was issued in February the following year (1916). Page 6 of the Manifesto states the following:

1. We ought to respect the personal characters of both others and ourselves, and thus reinforce the foundation of national morality;
2. We ought to nurture the spirit of the Public domain and thus accomplish the true aim of the Constitution;

⁶ *Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 592; However, the then Minister of Education lashed out against this resolution and created quite a stir among the people. He is reported to have said that the resolution "jeopardizes the state's policy to segregate religion and education." (Nakajima, Kuni *ibid.* (2), p. 52)

3. We ought to encourage voluntary action, while at the same time, pave the way for a development of organizational collaborations;
4. We ought to reform academics, raise the efficacy of education and bring forth genius in all fields;
5. Alongside encouraging fundamental research in science, we ought to place an unshakeable belief at its base and plan for the upliftment of spiritual culture;
6. We ought respect morality among nations, protect world peace and thus boost the noble cause of nation-building (⁷).

To put it plainly, the Manifesto states the rationale to aid progress in morality, education and science, and a will to enthusiastically open out into the outside world is clearly evident. Moreover, a project of enlightening the masses was also taken up by way of publication activities. The first of the compilation series “*Kiitsu Kyōkai Sōsho*” was brought out in December 1916 on the theme of “Collaborative Responsibility for Social Morality,” running across the 8 editions until November 1921.

What this means is that the activities of The Association Concordia were not merely limited to within Japan. Its intercourse with intellectuals abroad is illustrated by the propaganda of the Association taken up by

⁷ “*Kiitsu Kyōkai sengen* (The Association Concordia Manifesto)”, *Kiitsu Kyōkai Kaihō*, No. 7, March 1916 (*Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 613)

Naruse Jinzō, when he traveled to the USA in August 1912, to England in December and to the European continent the following January. Of particular significance is the formation of a “Concordia Association” in America on November 10th, 1913. In England too a similar association took seed. Besides, it is also conveyed that communication was established between scholars in France and Germany too (8).

What was the kind of stance adopted by Shibusawa in his engagement with The Association Concordia that carried out such objectives and activities? Moreover, what were his ideas on religion and morality? Answers to these questions are attempted in the following section.

2. Shibusawa Eiichi’s Ideas on Religion and Morality and The Association Concordia

Shibusawa makes the following remarks on the occasion of the first preliminary gathering of The Association Concordia held in April 1912. “Some decades ago I was asked by a scholar from Germany, ‘what’s the reason for the Japanese state to have had accomplished unification so

⁸ Naruse, Jinzō “Ōbei ryokō hōkoku (Report on the Tour to Europe and America)” / “Beikoku Kiitsu Kyōkai no setsuritsu (The Establishment of Concordia Association of America)”, *Kiitsu Kyōkai Kaihō*, No. 2, July 1913 (*Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, pp. 468-477); But the Concordia Associations of America and England are known to have stagnated following the outbreak of WWI (Nakajima, Kuni *ibid.* (2), pp. 60-61)

quickly?’ I replied that it was because the Imperial household was at the centre of the nation-state and that Confucian morality reigned people’s hearts making the noble cause distinctly clear. To which the scholar again questioned whether such an idea and authority would not waver sometime in the future. Well, looking at the thinking prevalent in society today, it is a fact a fear of it has grown. As for my own personal opinion, I think it is sufficient to seek succor in Confucian teachings, and make the Analects (*Rongo*) the basis for social conduct. But I doubt whether it would yield satisfactory results in the case of applying some other set of teachings other than that of Confucianism. It is on this point that I am skeptical about relying upon the persuasive powers of Buddhist and Christian teachings—so much for the reason behind calling this gathering”...so on and so forth (9).

Thus one catches a glimpse of how Shibusawa, in the 1910s, feared the loss of the efficacy of Imperial worship, Confucian morality, or for that matter, Buddhism or Christianity, and sought a support pillar in the inner spiritual realm in order to make do for such a loss.

Although many religionists, educationists and politicians apart from

⁹ “*Gendai shūkyō-kai kōkyū ni kansuru shūkai* (Gathering for the Investigation of Contemporary Religions)”, Bulletin *Kiitsu Kyōkai Kaihō*, No. 1, February 1913 (*Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 407)

industrialists like Shibusawa took part in The Association's programs, there was a slight variation in their individual aims and objectives.

It is known that educationist-Naruse Jinzō possessed the will to even found a new religion by himself, and as for The Association too, he imagined it to be an organization with strong religious overtones. He strived to realize the idea that genuine thought and religion have but one origin.

Religionist Anesaki Masaharu made an effort in getting rid of oppositions between religions, and he thought about a method to harmonize education with religion. Therefore, it is said that he expected such a role of this association.

Moreover, the focus of the ideas of political thinker Ukita Kazutami lies in wanting to find a consensus in the search for Truth.

On the other hand, Shibusawa, the entrepreneur, held the idea that it was possible to trace all human beings to a common source and to aim at the possibility of a religious unification with Confucianism at its centre. For which reason, he donated liberally in terms of financial contributions to build the economic foundation of The Association. Where the general annual membership was 6 Japanese Yens, Shibusawa donated 1000 Japanese Yens annually for a long period, bearing one-thirds of the gross annual income of

The Association (¹⁰).

However, it is found that his passion for The Association Concordia gradually weaned. The reason for which, he later explains thus: “Right from the beginning, I have personally not relied on religion believing firmly that it would be sufficient to just hold on to the teachings of Confucius. Morimura Ichizaemon stated his wish to rely either on Buddhism or Christianity, and as for Naruse Jinzō, he made clear his wish to form a new religion. As against this, Ōuchi Seiran (Buddhist scholar) vehemently opposed them saying that it were not possible to perform such outlandish things (such as syncretism or concord)!” Shibusawa had also proposed saying that “Religion comes to life only when it is applied to the world of politics or industry. There is a necessity for industrialists to cultivate their belief on that basis. How would it be to organize a singular religion with Confucian teachings at the root, not Christianity, neither Buddhism nor Shintō?” But, he found only a few takers. He notes, “The agenda of The Association Concordia was, namely, to pave the way for the self to seek refuge. Giving it the name of “*Kiitsu*” took its meaning from the idea of

¹⁰ According to the “*Kiitsu Kyōkai shūshi keisan-sho* (Statement of Accounts of The Association Concordia)” for four and a half years from July 1912 to December 1916, the total income declared for this period is ¥13,535 and 54 *sen*. Out of which the accrual from memberships was ¥2,329 and 50 *sen*, and ¥ 5000 as contributions of Shibusawa. Apart from these were contributions from Morimura Ichizaemon at ¥4000, Mikimoto Kōkichi ¥100 and Anesaki Masaharu ¥50 (*Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 631).

people of all walks of life being ascribed to a One, may they be ones devoted to economy or be moralists. But, trying it out in reality is not a simple task. Consequently, the idea reduced to holding on to the task by me, myself, in the least.” Elsewhere he adds, “Having formed The Association doesn’t seem appropriate to disband it. I am doing nothing more than attend the meetings and say something off and on. Honestly speaking, I am being thoroughly inconsistent, and can’t help but be criticized by people (¹¹).” Thus, while having planned “to organize a singular religion with Confucianism at the root” at the outset, Shibusawa came to understand that it was difficult to realize a union of existing religions, or even further, that it was unreasonable to create a single religion with Confucianism at its root. So it seems that, his level of expectations for and interest in The Association fell over a period of time as a result of it.

But, what was the nature of his understanding on religion and faith? For instance, Shibusawa speaks his mind thus: “It is popular religion which exploits superstition and makes foolish, common folk to commit a number of bad deeds. On the opposite pole are Confucian teachings which don’t speak about superstitions or irrational phenomena (*kairyoku-ranshin*) and I

¹¹ “*Kiitsu Kyōkai no seiritsu ni tsuite (sei · zoku)* (On the Formation of The Association Concordia (Contd.))”, *Uyo tankai danwa hikki* (Transcriptions at the hearing session held with Shibusawa Ei’ichi on January 17th & 24th 1928), (*Denki Shiriyō* Memoirs, pp. 412-413)

acclaim them for that very reason (¹²).” And, while reminiscing on the times of the establishment of The Association he writes, “(Morimura Ichizaemon) said, ‘it is on singing the amen or chanting *na-mu-myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō* that faith first solidifies. But I cannot get myself to beat the drum and chant. Men of wisdom and valor with Confucianism (*shishi-jinjin*) can’t place their faith on just anyone so blindly (¹³).”

Religionist Anesaki Masaharu is reported have confessed on how such ideas of religion cherished by Shibusawa were different from his own, after the death of Shibusawa. Namely, that Shibusawa demonstrated a predilection to think that Masters laid down noble teachings and by offering those he could lead the masses. His stance was to attempt a concordia of religions from such a vantage point. As against this, Anesaki himself considered that the distinctive feature of religion lies in sharing beliefs with others, in sharing life and death, and not in leading others. Which was where the gap existed between Shibusawa and himself, he said. In spite of that, Anesaki does not seem to refute Shibusawa who thought that “men of wisdom and valor with Confucianism (*shishi-jinjin*) are personalities who pioneered their age, and ‘foolish, common folk’ are creatures who are merely

¹² Shibusawa “*Nana-shō: Tōitsuteki dai-shūkyō* (Chapter 7: Unified Grand Religion)”, *Seien Hyakuwa, Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 420

¹³ “*Kiitsu Kyōkai no seiritsu ni tsuite (zoku)*”, *op. cit.*

way-led by religion.” And, that there is an insurmountable dividing line between the two.

Anesaki Masaharu was a first generation-Professor to occupy the Chair of Religious Studies at Tokyo Imperial University and is also acclaimed to have been the ‘founder of modern religious studies’ (¹⁴). Quite possibly, assuming such a stature, Anesaki only found Shibusawa’s ideas on religion too out-dated. However, having thought so does not mean that Anesaki negated Shibusawa. Whether it was regarding grappling with issues of cooperation between labor and management and moving people’s hearts in the wake of the upheavals in society and culture; or regarding how our nation, as a member of the world community, could cultivate the motive force of spiritual culture, it was Shibusawa who held a passion for such matters. Such were the kudos conferred upon Shibusawa by Anesaki on the one hand, though (¹⁵).

As The Association Concordia was an organization which brought together personalities with different standpoints, including Christian evangelists of American nationality, it is but obvious that there were differences of opinion within. Ukita Kazutami, who served as the Secretary

¹⁴ Isomae, Jun’ichi ed. *Kidai nihon ni okeru chishikijin to shūkyō—Anesaki Masaharu no kiseki*, Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 2002

¹⁵ Anesaki, Masaharu “*Sei’en-o to shūkyō mondai* (Uncle Shibusawa and Religious Matters)”, *Ryūmon Zasshi*, November 1933 (*Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 729)

from its inception, gave vent to his true feelings about The Association in a letter addressed to Naruse Jinzō writing, “it is nothing more than a kind of a club for socialization, wherein the Secretary is discouraged from touching upon topical issues, making it difficult to expect any effective action (¹⁶).” Further, a certain member is said to have taunted at the Association commenting that it “concurred only on one point which was to not concord! (¹⁷)” However, one must appreciate the fact that The Association provided an opportunity for the participants to get acquainted with their respective ideals, objectives and speculations, as also to provide them with a platform to help come to terms with the reality of their fellow beings.

Shibusawa Ei'ichi too was not an exception to it. In 1928, he makes the following remarks. “Fortunately, owing to the favor of Anesaki Masaharu, I hardly show my face at The Association of what has presently become a mere counseling forum—not a religious outfit nor an academic research society (¹⁸).” This statement comes at a juncture after the activities of The Association reached a culmination during the period immediately before and after the First World War. And, it would not be a mistake to note that the observations made by the aging Shibusawa on the existing affairs of The

¹⁶ Nakajima, Kuni *ibid.* (2), p. 64

¹⁷ Reported by Hattori Unokichi in his reminiscences compiled in “*Kiitsu Kyōkai shusai ko-Shibusawa shishaku tsuioku danwa-kai*”, *Ryūmon Zasshi*, December 1931; *Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 721

¹⁸ “*Kiitsu Kyōkai no seiritsu ni tsuite (zoku)*”, *op. cit.*

Association were rather negatively nuanced.

However, the author holds the opinion that it is the encounter of Shibusawa Ei'ichi and The Association Concordia which has an important significance. To put it specifically, the significance lies, in a sense, in the fact of Shibusawa carrying forward, all on his own, the ideals he envisaged for The Association at the time of its establishment. And he does so, after a self-assessment of ascertaining those aspects that he is in a position to share with the colleagues who gathered there, and clarifying those that he could not share. For, although he does mention about renouncing the idea of religious unification and of being “reduced to holding on to Confucian teaching on his own,” Shibusawa brings out a publication of the populist *Rongo to Soroban* in 1916, and an interpretation of the Analects, *Rongo Kōgi*, in 1925. He also firmly attaches himself to activities to champion support for the “*Shibun-kai*,” an organization for the propagation of Confucian teachings and research. On the other hand, his idiosyncratic response to “Issues Concerning the Current Situation,” evident in his carrying forward of “private-level Japanese-American diplomacy” (¹⁹), is a widely acclaimed fact.

¹⁹ Shibusawa, Masahide *Taiheiyō ni kakeru hashi—Shibusawa Ei'ichi no shōgai*, Yomiuri Shimbunsha, 1970; Kimura, Masato *Shibusawa Ei'ichi—minkan keizai gaikō no sōshisha*, Chūōkōronsha, 1991

The intellectuals of The Association Concordia debated on how to stabilize the society during 1910-20 and attempted to undertake the role of proposing 'a desirable ideal'. But, amidst affairs both inside and outside Japan growing complex, they only happen to demonstrate, paradoxically, that a 'concordia' on various issues was not an easy task. To sum up the argument in relation to Shibusawa, it is found that there is an aspect to the latter half of Shibusawa's career, beginning with his withdrawal from economic enterprises in 1909 and shifting completely towards social projects in 1916, that is in synch with his mode of engagement with The Association which took off in 1912. And there is definite evidence that the role played by the course of debates on religion and morality inside The Association in determining the direction of the latter half of Shibusawa's career, was not a meager one.

In Conclusion

The period from 1910~20 witnessed the outbreak of the First World War. It was a time when movements that ensued from a kind of soul-searching exercise and aimed at international collaboration became distinctly visible. Born in 1912, The Association Concordia, right from the onset, displayed a strong tendency of arguing for a 'concord' based on religion. However, that

was not the only objective. This Association was strongly inclined to hold wide-ranging discussions on a 'morality among nations' and 'world peace'. This is also evident from a motto inserted on the stationery for international correspondence, begun to be used from the spring of 1914 onwards, entitled "Concord and Cooperation between Classes, Nations, Races and Religions (²⁰)." The publication of "Manifesto in Response to the Current Situation" and serial compilations *Sōsho* in 1916, carrying translations of western books, are clear results of the same.

Thus, it may be stated that, at a time when The Association signaled out its 'ideal' to both inside and outside Japan, Shibusawa was in fact promoting the realization of his own ideal ("moral ideal," to put it narrowly). Just that he accomplished doing so by associating himself to The Association either directly or indirectly—which depended on whether he tagged along its activities or way led it in a manner characteristic of himself.

It may be pointed out that The Association Concordia of Japan (as also the Concordia Association of America) harbored contradictions within itself in the face of real society, or that Shibusawa himself did struggle to contemplate a response to changes in society. But that needs to be evaluated

²⁰ Anesaki, Masaharu "*Kiitsu Kyōkai konjaku-dan*" (a hearing session held in May 1938), *Denki Shiryō* Memoirs, p. 416

rather critically in the light of a better understanding of the respective social perceptions of the people concerned and their inter-relationship with the society at large.