

"What is the Buraku Issue?: Its Past and Present"

By Dr. Teruo Kuribayashi
On 11th May 2014
In Kobe Union Church
At 13.15h in the Sanctuary



<http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/images/botsman-lrg.jpg>

In Japan, the *Burakumin* minority have been oppressed for more than four hundred years. Discrimination against them remains still in the areas of marriage, housing, and employment. It clearly illustrates what oppression means in seemingly homogeneous Japanese society today.

It is not easy to establish the historical origin of them. According to some sources, it goes back to the Heian period (797-1185 A.D.). Its religious roots lie in a combination of two factors: the Shinto idea of pollution, and the Buddhist abhorrence of killing animals, a practice that polluted those involved in disposing of dead people and animals and thus prevented them from participating in religious rites. They were seen as filth (*eta*) and as non-people (*hinin*), and were settled in the isolated areas (*buraku*). This discrimination was institutionalized during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867) when these groups were seen as inferior castes and were ranked below warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Through the present-day Burakumin no longer undertake activities such as slaughtering animals, they continue to carry the taint. One of the earliest movements to take up the cause of Burakumin liberation was the Suiheisha (Levelers Association), founded in 1922, which drew its ideas from Marxism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The Suiheisha's symbol was a crown of thorns.

In his book, *A Theology of the Crown of Thorns* (1991, in Japanese), Dr. Teruo Kuribayashi relates the liberation of Burakumin to the biblical theme of liberation. He analyzes the adaption of the biblical symbol of Jesus' crown of thorns by Burakumin, which was chosen, in part, to contrast with the Japanese imperial throne of chrysanthemums. More importantly, Jesus' crown, now seen in passive, devotional, and contemplative terms, becomes a symbol that points to the suffering of the minority and also reveals the hope of their final victory. It has become a symbol of liberation for the oppressed of the world.

From 'Burakumin Liberation Theology,' in *Dictionary of the Third World Theologies* (2000)



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