

Tokyo interfaith panel eyes new suicide views

by [Hisashi Yukimoto](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

Japan, which has one of the highest suicide rates among developed countries, is increasingly using the term for "voluntary death" instead of "killing oneself."

Indeed, Roman Catholic Archbishop Peter Takeo Okada of Tokyo, says he has approved of the term "voluntary death," noting that "since the church had taught for a long time that suicide is a sin, we had not held funerals for suicides."

An interfaith symposium in Tokyo, sponsored by the Catholic Bishops Conference in Japan, explored on October 29 the shifting attitudes of Japanese religious communities on suicide, including whether the term should be changed to "voluntary death." The symposium was titled "The Mission of Religionists on Voluntary Death."

One of four panelists, Wataru Kaya, a Japanese Shinto priest and psychiatrist, emphasized the importance of prayers and compassion for those who die voluntarily, based on Japanese traditional cultures. He reiterated that Shintoism "does not see voluntary death as an absolute evil."

But Hiroshi Saito, who heads the study office of the Institute of the Doctrine of Oomoto, a Sectarian Shinto sect formed in 1892, noted that Oomoto's canon says, "Suicide is a sin among sins." He warned, "By using the term 'voluntary death,' I am afraid that a sense of sin for committing suicide can be unconsciously weakened."

Saito

criticized views by José M. Bertolote, from the Department of Mental Health of the World Health Organization, expressed in a 2008 article in the *Economist*, that suicide in Japan is part of a culture that includes an "ethical standard to preserve one's honor and to take responsibility by suicide." Saito said, "these are rather biased views . . . few people in Japan today see suicide as a virtue."

The World

Health Organization has reported that about 26 per 100,000 people in Japan take their own lives, compared to nine per 100,000 for the United Kingdom and 11 per 100,000 in the United States. Causes include depression, health problems and economic pressures, according to Japan's National Police Agency.

Daiki Nakashita, a Japanese priest of Otani sect of the True Pure Land School Buddhism, said that the role of religious communities should include "turning pains and wounds into connections" by "sharing the pains and wounds within groups of the bereaved" and "holding Buddhist memorial services for those who died voluntarily."

In Japan, "motives to live seem to be getting weaker," said Archbishop Okada, who is vice president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Japan. "The mission of religionists is to give [people] the reason, motive and purpose of living."

It was not until November last year that St. Ignatius Church, site of the symposium, started the St. Ignatius Project to Protect Life and held the first mass in Japan to remember those who died voluntarily and to care for bereaved family members and friends. —ENInews