

World religions can learn from Japan: PM

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TOKYO (AFP) – Prime Minister Taro Aso said Thursday some of the world's major religions could learn from Japan's work ethic.

The conservative leader, who is known for his controversial remarks, told a parliamentary committee that Japan's belief in hard work contrasted with that of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

"Our values in Japan regard hard work as important," Aso said during a discussion on the global economic crisis.

"To work is good. It's completely different thinking from the Old Testament," Aso said.

"We should share our philosophy with many other nations."

The parliamentary committee discussed the impact on Japan of the global economic crisis, with Aso voicing fears about the recent slump in the dollar.

Christians make up around two percent of the population in deeply secular Japan, where most people follow a mix of Buddhism and Shinto.

Aso, who is a Catholic, was apparently referring to the Bible's description of work as God's punishment of Adam for disobeying his commands in the Garden of Eden.

He made a similar argument in a speech on December 7 in southern Japan, according to the Nikkei newspaper.

"In the Old Testament, God gave Adam punishment: labour. The Old Testament, Christianity, Islam -- if you add them up, what percent of the world is that? About 70 percent of religions hold a philosophy that work is a punishment."

He then referred to Japan's oldest known book, the Kojiki, which features Japan's creation myths. In the text, an important sun goddess saw many other deities working.

The Japanese are famous for their long working hours, which have turned the island nation into the world's second largest economy.

Thousands of Japanese literally work themselves to death each year, a problem that has become so common it has spawned its own word - "karoshi".

Aso, 68, is notorious for gaffes ranging from making jokes about Alzheimer's disease to once saying that Japanese were better placed to mediate in the Middle East because they do not have blue eyes.

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