

Discourses and Realpolitik on Monotheism and Polytheism

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Abstract

In this paper, I will first examine the discourses on monotheism and polytheism in Japan and the West and discuss their characteristics. Then, I will try to shed light on the cultural structure of the respective discourses in the context of Orientalism and Occidentalism, and identify religious structures from the additional viewpoint of “idolatry.” The prohibition of idolatry is central to the beliefs of the three monotheistic religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Idolatry in this sense means worship not only of tangible objects, but also of concepts and images created by men, which is termed “invisible idolatry.” In the modern and contemporary ages, idolatry is re-interpreted in terms of “replacement,” “extension,” and “inversion.” Finally, the paper will argue that “invisible idolatry” can become the breeding ground for structural violence through reference to eschatology and evolution, and will suggest how discourses on monotheism and polytheism might be prevented from developing into discourses of violence.

Keywords: monotheism, polytheism, Orientalism, idolatry, structural violence

1. Trends in Japan and the West

1. Trends in Japan

Commentaries on “monotheism and polytheism” are being heard with increasing frequency in various platforms in Japan. This trend has become particularly noticeable since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. First of all, I will discuss some discourses on monotheism and polytheism in Japan and the typological images that underlie these discourses.

Takeshi Umehara, who is well known as a pioneer in the field of Japanese culture, makes the following comments in his book published before the September 11 attacks: “I believe that just as the former trends in civilization moved from polytheism to monotheism, in the future, civilization should move in a direction from monotheism to polytheism. Polytheism is by far preferable to monotheism if many races are to share this small world.”¹⁾

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In addition to Umehara, numerous experts on Japanese culture consider polytheism superior to monotheism. In Japan, monotheism is often criticized as being the cause of wars, conflicts, and the destruction of nature. On the other hand, we occasionally hear voices praising the understanding of nature found in polytheism and animism as a solution to these types of problems. The idea that the problems of war and the destruction of nature could be resolved by dispensing with monotheistic thought and undergoing a shift to a polytheistic approach is so simple and understandable that such an idea has captured the hearts of many people. This type of idea is easily accepted in Japan, partly because of the current social climate that makes finding a clear national identity difficult. Until the early 1990s, economic prosperity and material affluence were considered to be reliable indicators of values. As such stability is being lost, however, traditional, spiritual values are being reevaluated as a counteraction of the age, and reference to such values is accepted more favorably.

Incidentally, one of the books published before the 1990s that discuss the comparison between animism and monotheism is Keiji Iwata's popular *Kami to Kami – Animism Uchuu no Tabi* (Gods and God: a Journey to the Animistic World). Iwata invents the concept of "gods vs. God" and discusses the characteristics of and differences between animism and monotheism from an anthropological viewpoint. In his view, the concepts of "gods" and "God" are not mutually exclusive at all. Rather, he focuses his attention on the continuity of their positions, their topological relationship, as clearly shown in his remark: "The difference among deities, from animistic gods to the God of monotheism, is found only in the physical movements of believers."²⁾

More recently, some researchers have also dealt with the continuity between monotheism and polytheism. For example, Soho Machida holds: "Though there seems to exist a wide gap between monotheism and polytheism in terms of doctrines and rituals, they are not completely separate from each other, and they overlap in the meaning of 'self-contradictory identity' in the ultimate sense."³⁾ However, Machida describes monotheism as a subject theory, and polytheism as a predicate theory, and positions them at opposite ends of a spectrum. Viewed from another angle, he argues that monotheism and polytheism are so mutually exclusive that they cannot be associated with each other unless the state of "absolutely contradictory self-identity" is to be achieved.

Of course, it is not my intention to conclude, by examining only these limited arguments, that there is a growing emphasis on exclusivity in recent studies as compared to those conducted before the 1990s. When we look beyond academic works and focus on Japanese popular culture, a certain trend becomes clearly visible. Let me discuss some cases that evidence such a trend.

Ken Sakamura, a computer scientist who is well known in Japan as the developer of the TRON operating system and who is now playing a leading role in creating a ubiquitous network society, says that though he finds it interesting that "ubiquitous" is originally

a Christian term meaning “God is everywhere all the time,” this concept is understood differently in Japanese society. He argues:

For me, the term ‘ubiquitous’ evokes an image of traditional Japanese multitudinous gods, not the monotheistic God, communicating with each other through their own, invisible network, everywhere, and I think this image is closer to the reality of a future ubiquitous network society. For various reasons, the term ‘ubiquitous’ will become more prevalent. ... But the term will take on the meaning of ‘multitudinous gods being everywhere.’ For this reason, I am sure that Japan will be able to lead the world in this field.⁴⁾

This argument shows that the difference between the West and Japan can be highlighted through a comparison between monotheism and polytheism, even in the field of cutting-edge information technology. Development of any new technology requires a kind of conceptual model before it takes shape. If a polytheistic model can play a role in encouraging the development of cutting-edge technologies, we may say that the relationship between monotheism and polytheism is a competitive one in a constructive sense.

On the other hand, not a few remarks on this issue can nurture hatred and invite prejudice when made in connection with the terrorist attacks of September 11, such as the following:

So what is the most annoying, or the most harmful in the world, might be the battle between monotheism and monotheism. I think the ongoing conflict between America, a Christian country, and the Islamic world is one of the greatest threats to the future of mankind. What lies behind the conflict is the pathology of monotheism, and to be frank, monotheism is the source of all evils for mankind. I wish all monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—would become extinct (laughter).⁵⁾

Though this remark was made jokingly, such sentiments are shared widely among the general public in Japan. Any prolonged conflicts and wars have a number of causes, including political and economic confrontations and differences in values. However, we are too often tempted to wholly attribute such conflicts and wars to religious differences, as doing so makes the situation look much simpler.

Such simplification can also be found in *Baka no Kabe* (The Wall of Fools) by Takeshi Yoro. He writes:

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are religions of monism, after all. The world has witnessed too many mistakes stemming from the monistic approach for these one hundred and fifty years. Therefore, I really hope that the world in the 21st century will no longer be a monistic one.... What I term ‘Wall of Fools,’ or the attitude of ignoring

any information that we don't want, results from monism in a sense.... Put in a religious context, monism and dualism can be likened to monotheism and polytheism."⁶⁾

Any scholar of religion knows that it is wrong to categorize these three religions simply as monistic religions, but Yoro mistakenly holds that all monotheistic religions stem from monism, and associates them with "fundamentalism" and "the state of ceasing to think."

The superiority of polytheism to monotheism has been emphasized even further since the start of the war in Iraq. This is because the logic and terminology of President George W. Bush are thought to stem from Christianity as a monotheistic religion, and such monotheistic logic is often seen as the enemy of peace. In this case, however, the multiplicity characteristic of monotheistic religions, including Christianity, is not considered or is even intentionally ignored. When examining a given subject, the subject is more likely to be criticized or controlled if we ignore its multiplicity and assign a fixed image to it, as I will discuss later.

The comments that have been made about monotheism and polytheism are too numerous to count, but they can be summarized into the following categories:

- i) Because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are religions that believe in only one God, it is impossible to avoid conflicts and clashes.
- ii) Many of the problems of the modern world such as wars and the destruction of nature can be attributed to monotheism (monotheistic civilization), and thus Japanese polytheism (polytheistic civilization) should overcome the limitations of monotheistic thought and contribute to the resolutions of these problems.
- iii) While monotheistic religions are exclusive, self-righteous, war-like, and destructive of nature, polytheistic religions are all-encompassing, harmonious, friendly, and supportive of coexistence with nature.

1.2. Trends in the West

The West also has a history of criticizing monotheism, although the points discussed are different from those in the Japanese critique. We can refer to Regina M. Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* as a recent example. She argues that monotheism is responsible for the long legacy of violence in the West, a claim that has ignited a controversy. According to Schwartz, the connection between monotheism's belief in a transcendent other (God) and the formation of a monotheistic identity in opposition to others (men) is the root of monotheism's violence.⁷⁾ She maintains that the violent identity of monotheism reflects a narrative of "scarcity" and that the desire for a finite amount of identity, like finite territory, has caused violence.⁸⁾ Therefore, she concludes: "My re-vision would produce an alternative

Bible that subverts the dominant vision of violence and scarcity with an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity. It would be a Bible embracing multiplicity instead of monotheism.”⁹⁾

In the West, the criticism of monotheism emerged during the Enlightenment. For example, David Hume argued that unlike monotheism, polytheism is pluralistic in nature, unbound by doctrine, and therefore far more tolerant than monotheism, which tends to force people to believe in one faith.¹⁰⁾ Niccolo Machiavelli concluded that the civic virtue possessed by pagans is superior to Christian virtue.¹¹⁾ The term “pagan” can be an insulting term referring to a believer in polytheism and idolatry, but in this particular case, this term can be viewed as almost synonymous with polytheism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau also held that as a civic religion, pagan faith is more favorable than Christianity.¹²⁾ The most ardent defender of the attempt to return to heresy and repudiate the God of Christianity was Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Nietzsche, while agreeing with the monotheistic view that heresy places a high value on animal instincts, naturalism, and self-deification, rejects a transcendent God who calls for self-abnegation, and chooses the pagan teaching that affirms self worth and life as a desirable path to follow.¹³⁾

The discourse on monotheism and polytheism in Japan looks very similar to that in the West as represented by Schwartz, and they do share many common interests. Needless to say, however, each discourse is rooted in different historical origins. On the one hand, the discourse seen in Japan’s modern history called for a return to traditional values and often provided an ideological ground in support of the nationalist mission to resist the paradigm of Western modernization. Regardless of whether or not this mission was successfully achieved from today’s perspective, it is at least certain that the discourse of those days was directed toward what we now call the “postmodern” movement. On the other hand, the discourse in the West comes mainly from the Enlightenment. Consequently, the trend to reject transcendental values and instead embrace pluralism arises from “modern” impulses, which are characteristic of the Enlightenment. Most likely, Schwartz would consider her interpretation to be a “postmodern” one, but in the Western context, it should be treated as the current style of the “modern” stream of criticism, no matter how controversial her interpretation might be.

In the next section, I will try to shed light on the problems that underlie the trends in Japan and the West just discussed, by focusing on cultural and religious structures.

2. Transformation and Expansion of Idolatry

1. Conflicts of Cultural Structures – Orientalism and Occidentalism

From a historical perspective, cultural structures that criticize monotheism and support polytheism can be seen repeatedly in Japan’s modern history. That is to say, the notion that

the East, Asia, and Japan assume the role of advocating new values and thought systems that transcend the limitations of the West appears and reappears in cycles, reflecting the West's repeated crises and spiritual and moral decline. Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) clearly points out the problems inherent in this way of thinking, which places the East and the West in opposition to each other within a two-dimensional argument.

"Orientalism" originally referred to a style of literature and art that appeared in modern Europe, with a deeply romantic or foreign flavor. Said, however, gives this word a new interpretation. He sees Orientalism as a form of control over the East by the West, based on the view that there is a fundamental difference between the East and the West. For example, Orientals are seen as irrational, vulgar, childish, and "strange," while Westerners are seen as rational, moral, mature, and "normal."¹⁴ Muslims were the major targets of such a negative image of Orientals, as Said discusses in the following:

Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma.... The point is that what remained current about Islam was some necessarily diminished version of those great dangerous forces that it symbolized for Europe.... Islam became an image—the word is Daniel's [Norman Daniel, British historian specializing in the Middle Ages] but it seems to me to have remarkable implications for Orientalism in general—whose function was not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian.¹⁵

Said recognizes that imposing a fixed negative image becomes a tool of control. Just as the West assigned a fixed image to the East from the outside (Orientalism), the East also attached a fixed image to the West, which could be called Occidentalism. Of course, the relationship between Orientalism and Occidentalism is not a symmetrical one, but as modern Japanese history shows, the attempt to emphasize the superiority of the East to the West has a structural similarity to Orientalism. Furthermore, the approach of depicting an outward-looking self-portrait in an essentialistic manner through a "representation" that is separated from the true historical fact could be referred to as "reverse Orientalism."¹⁶ Some radical examples of reverse Orientalism include: Japan's Project for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and Pan-Asianism; Hindu nationalist movements represented by Arya Samaj;¹⁷ and Chundoism and Tonghak, new religions of Korea established during the modernization process of the country.

If we think of the discussion on monotheism and polytheism in Japan in this context, it is clear that monotheism is positioned as Occidentalism and polytheism as reverse Orientalism. In Occidentalism, the function of monotheism is not so much to represent itself as to represent it for the Japanese, if we borrow the words of Said. In reverse Orientalism,

polytheism is described as a transcendental essence that simplifies (unifies) diversified realities, and that lacks historical specificity.

2.2. Invisible Idolatry

In Orientalism, a fixed image has destructive effects, and the imposition of a negative image can result in a violent reaction. In the modern world, the images generated by Orientalism and Occidentalism are subject to mass production through a variety of media, including the Internet. The proliferation of images, however, is by no means a problem unique to the modern world. The mechanism and nature of this problem correspond to “idolatry” in the tradition of monotheistic religions. In this section, I would like to focus on “idolatry” as a means of analyzing in greater detail the structure of the discourse on monotheism and polytheism.

Idolatry has been the subject of harsh criticism in monotheistic religions that believe in an absolute God. The “prohibition of idolatry” is not only a tradition common to the three major monotheistic religions; one could even say that the identity of these monotheistic religions is dependent on the denial of idolatry. In this sense, we could say that the true opposition to monotheism is neither polytheism nor atheism but “idolatry.” In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the prohibition of idolatry is associated with the second commandment as expressed in Exodus, Chapter 20, while in Judaism, the prohibited worship of other gods is called *Avodah Zarah* and is not limited simply to visible idols (*pesel* in Hebrew). In order to examine the problems of the modern world, we must understand “idolatry” not only as serving visible idols but also in the broader sense of “invisible idolatry.” The following comments on this point by the theologian Paul Tillich are extremely helpful:

Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance (the best example is the contemporary idolatry of religious nationalism).¹⁸⁾

Tillich wrote *Systematic Theology* in 1951, but the importance of understanding religious nationalism as idolatry has increased dramatically since the events of September 11. As Tillich’s words imply, all men and all religions can be exposed to the danger of idolatry.

Isn’t it, however, too easy to say that something finite should not be given infinite significance? If idolatry could be avoided with such simple formulations, idolatry would not be a serious problem to begin with. Tillich recognizes the danger of making the nation into an “absolute” in the fervor of religious nationalism. But while God’s sovereignty can coexist with the nation-state in the West, the idea of the nation-state itself is occasionally considered dubious in the Islamic world. Tillich never witnessed in his lifetime the extremely purified prohibition of idolatry that has become popular among certain Islamists who are hostile to

Western society and its values. In this sense, we cannot be content with Tillich's formulations. In the next section, I will discuss the manifestations of idolatry seen in the modern and contemporary world.

2.3. Discourse on Idolatry in the Modern and Contemporary World

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their book *Idolatry*, discuss how the issue of idolatry has been interpreted in the Bible and through Western history. They argue that in the modern and contemporary world the issue of idolatry has been discussed beyond the religious realm in terms of three models, namely, "replacement," "extension," and "inversion."¹⁹⁾

a. Replacement model

While idolatry is often defined as worship of "false gods" (pagan gods) instead of the righteous God, "some idealistic value" replaces "righteous God" in the more secular discourse on idolatry. For example, Francis Bacon discusses an "ideal of science" as an alternative to a "righteous God." This means that, in our pursuit of authentic science, we should remove all idols from our minds, just as all idols are rejected in the worship of the authentic God. Bacon named four idols: "*idola tribus*" (idols of the tribe) which are common to humanity; "*idola specus*" (idols of the den) which are peculiar to the individual; "*idola fori*" (idols of the marketplace) which come from the effects of language on the mind; and "*idola theatri*" (idols of the theater) which result from existing philosophical systems or faulty reasoning.²⁰⁾ Karl Marx, on the other hand, tried to point out that the capitalist economy could detract from intrinsic human value by saying, "Money is the Jealous God of Israel before whom no other gods may exist."²¹⁾ For Marx, what stands in opposition to the deification of money is not the right God but mankind's essence, and what should be discovered in an authentic sense is not God but humanity.

In the replacement model, a drastic shift from the traditional understanding of idolatry is observed, a shift which is deeply associated with the attitude of the Enlightenment in terms of the attempt to fill the space formerly occupied by God with a different concept. In the replacement model, the prohibition of idolatry, which is a strict admonition that best distinguishes the nature of monotheistic religions, and therefore is most deeply associated with religious traditions, is deprived of its religious meaning and yet is given a specific role to play in the secular world.

b. Extension model

The purpose of this model is to extend the meaning of idols and destroy them in a broader sense. Unlike the replacement model discussed above, in which old idols are replaced by new ones, in the extension model all gods and ideas are suspected to be idols. One of the representative advocates of this model is Ludwig Wittgenstein, who claims, "All that philosophy

can do is to destroy idols. And that means not making any new ones—say out of the ‘absence of idols.’”²²⁾ With these words, Wittgenstein extends the meaning of idols in philosophical terminology, while in the case of Tillich, the concept of idols is extended theologically.

For the purposes of this paper, the extension model is of great importance. This is because the extended interpretation of idolatry allows more room for the destruction of idols, and eventually for the justification of violence. Yet, the use of violence does not stem from the extension of the meaning of idolatry alone. Rather, it is necessary to determine what structural problem requires an extension of the meaning, in both religious and political terms. In discussing the extension model, we should also be aware that it does not mean the extension of the multi-layered interpretation of the prohibition of idolatry in its entirety, but rather, is often the extension, or emphasis, of certain parts of the interpretation. Essentially, the meaning of the prohibition of idolatry is so diversified that no single interpretation is applicable. Halbertal and Margalit, too, conclude that it is wrong to assign a single definition to the essential nature of idolatry.²³⁾ Accordingly, if the interpretation, in spite of its multiplicity, is simplified and then extended, we should critically examine the possibility that the prohibition of idolatry, which was originally established as a “means” to achieve the “end” of serving God righteously, might become a goal itself.

Hiroshi Ichikawa regards the nature of idolatry (*Avodah Zarah*) as a perversion whereby “the means itself becomes an end.” He also maintains that idols include all concepts and ideologies, which are creations of human mental activities, and that in the Israeli religions, “the state of freedom is achieved only through constant destruction of such concepts, or in other words, through denial.”²⁴⁾ As this remark indicates, the extension model, to which modern and contemporary ways of thinking may be applicable, is by no means an invention of the modern and contemporary ages. Rather, it stems from the Biblical tradition.²⁵⁾

c. Inversion model

This model inverts the hierarchy between monotheism and polytheism or heresy, while maintaining their confrontational relationship. The most typical case of the inversion model can be seen in the reasoning of Hume and Nietzsche, whom I introduced above as representative critics of monotheism in the Western world. Both Hume and Nietzsche consider polytheism or heresy to be superior to monotheism, while in the context of violence, the issue of “scarcity” vs. “multiplicity” is emphasized, as can be seen in Schwartz’s work. Though Schwartz’s criticism of monotheistic violence is not directly related to the affirmation of polytheism or heresy, her reasoning can be categorized in terms of the inversion model because of her effort to invert the values of “singularity” and “multiplicity.”

If viewed from the perspective of western history, the discourse on monotheism and polytheism in Japan falls into the category of the inversion model. However, if the positioning of monotheism as Occidentalism and polytheism as reverse Orientalism stems

from the anti-West attitude or modern nationalism, we may have to conclude that the logic behind the discourse in Japan is closer to the replacement model. This is because in modern Japanese history, Western culture, like idolatry, has been seen as something to be overcome due to its “evil” materialism and individualism on the one hand, while the splendor of the Japanese traditional spirit was emphasized and the emperor system and national Shintoism, reorganized in a polytheistic manner, came to assume the role of the “principle” of the Japanese spirit, on the other.²⁶⁾

Furthermore, the discourse on monotheism and polytheism can best be seen as a combination of the inversion and replacement models in light of the increasing ambiguity of the boundary between Western history and Japanese history in today’s world. By looking at the discourse in this way, we will be able to trace the paths of the drastic development of the postmodern tendencies (criticism of the modern by “inversion”) in the modernization process (reorganization of traditional values by “replacement”) with greater ease, and also to discern the repeatedly-traced paths in today’s discourse.

I have sought the context necessary for a proper interpretation of the discourse on monotheism and polytheism by focusing on the issue of idolatry. The meaning of idolatry cannot be fully understood in terms of monotheistic religions only; rather, its outline becomes visible when associated with the world external to monotheistic religions (the world of heresy). We should at least be aware of the fact that no lessons or formulas can help us to avoid idolatry, as I argued earlier in relation to Tillich. Monotheistic religions, inherently, involve the danger of idolatry and the tensions caused by such danger. Without the tensions, monotheistic religions could not exist. Worship of God and worship of idols have been inseparable since the age of the Bible, both conceptually and in religious life. Violent discourses emerge when the danger of idolatry is “externalized” and imposed on “others,” without recognizing this inseparability.

3. Various Aspects of Structural Violence in Realpolitik

1. Invisible Idolatry and Structural Violence

In the modern world, when many events are transformed into visual images, such images can potentially become “idols” in the media. At times, the images created do not point to the truth but rather function as “idols” that hide the truth. Let me discuss this issue in the context of the realpolitik of the fight against terrorism.

Since September 11, 2001, the expression “the evil one” has been used frequently in the context of the war on terror. In the Middle East, where anti-American sentiments are very strong, the name “the evil one” is given to America, which itself is supposedly fighting to win against “evil.” In any case, there is a way in which the image of the “fight between good and evil” strengthens these mutually antagonistic sentiments. The American religious sociologist Robert

N. Bellah made the following comments regarding the language used by President Bush: “Bush’s language strangely mirrors that of Osama bin Laden, who also believes that he is at war with ‘evil.’ It suggests that in a prolonged war on terrorism we will in many ways resemble our opponents.”²⁷⁾ As Bellah points out, images of good and evil reverse and proliferate with ease. This, in essence, is the demonic power of idolatry. If materialism, represented by capitalism, and imperialism, especially in the form of military intervention by the U.S., extend themselves through the power of proliferation and impact the entire world (these are typical images of the “West” in Occidentalism), then it should come as no surprise that the persons who are oppressed by materialism and imperialism would see that power as a kind of idolatry. Put another way, “invisible idolatry” can become the breeding ground for structural violence, and at times people resort to direct, physical violence in order to stand up against such structural violence.

While “structural violence” is a well-known term especially in peace studies, let me introduce the meaning of this term, defined by Johan Galtung. Galtung believed that peace could not be achieved simply by getting rid of personal and direct violence, and he expanded the notion of violence. According to Galtung, violence exists if people are influenced in such a way that their immediate somatic and intellectual self-realization does not fully meet their potential self-realization.²⁸⁾ This is what he terms “structural violence.” In the context discussed earlier, if Muslims are deprived of inherent human “dignity” or allowed less freedom as a result of Western materialism or imperialism, then structural violence exists. In this sense, “invisible idolatry” can generate structural violence, and those who have become aware of such structural violence might exercise “direct violence” to destroy idols.

This formula took its most extreme form in the terrorist attacks of September 11. In the eyes of the terrorists, the World Trade Center may have appeared as an “idol” that embodied the riches and violence of capitalism. The Pentagon may have appeared as an “idol” embodying military force. This is why, despite the loss of many precious lives, the attacks were greeted with jubilation aroused by the desire to see the destruction of those idols. What can we do to prevent the repetition of an iconoclasm that combines both despair and jubilation?

3.2. Eschatology and Evolution

Occidentalism always takes the form of an anti-Western attitude. As Occidentalism functions to accentuate the conflict between eastern and western cultures, it is unavoidable that religious differences are brought to the fore. The destruction of idols, which was originally a religious act, can now be seen even in the political and social realms, which may be a result of the power of proliferation inherent to idolatry. Then, what ideas provide sufficient room for such proliferation? I will consider this question in terms of eschatology and evolution.

Eschatology often talks about the world being in a state of war between good and evil. With this worldview as a premise, violent acts can be justified by the belief that the world is already in a state of war.²⁹⁾ In other words, there is a danger that eschatology will function

as structural violence by providing religious justification for personal violence. Of course, eschatology can also play a constructive role in presenting new visions beyond the existing social order, as evidenced in the theology of liberation that emerged in the Christian world during the 1960s. Kanzō Uchimura, a famous Japanese pacifist, also emphasized eschatology, especially the second coming of Christ, in his quest for peace. In this sense, eschatology can also provide the grounds for the denial of violence. Eschatology, which is based on the denial of existing reality, can be quite ambiguous, as its basic premise can be transformed into either combative energy or energy to strive for peace. If we remain aware of such ambiguity, then the mechanism whereby good and evil invert, or, in Bellah's words, the mechanism whereby the good one who has been supposedly fighting against the evil one in order to achieve peace comes to resemble the opponent, will become visible.

Eschatology is a worldview and historical vision common to the monotheistic religions, but its influence changes form to arise even in the secular world. Evolution is a representative example of this phenomenon. What I refer to here as "evolution" is not "biological evolution," but rather "Social Darwinism." Social Darwinism attempts to apply the approaches of evolution—the "struggle for survival" and the "survival of the fittest"—to human society. Social Darwinism, which was conceived in the 19th century, gave birth to eugenics at the beginning of the 20th century. Eugenics applies the principles of evolution and genetics to humans, attempting to change (or "improve") the natural fate of human beings. While eschatology tries to portray human fate based on the premise of God, Social Darwinism and eugenics try to depict the fate of human beings, societies, and nations in the absence of God. In this sense, evolution, as represented by Social Darwinism, can be seen as a secularized form of Christian eschatology.

Social Darwinism also gave birth to an evolutionary understanding of civilizations. Stated simply, since the beginning of the 20th century, Western societies have generally taken the approach of ranking civilizations under the Anglo-Saxon civilization, which is viewed as the pinnacle of civilization. For this reason, just as eschatology sometimes functions as structural violence in justification of personal violence, evolution, being premised upon a ranking of civilizations, can be transformed into structural violence on the reasoning that it is natural for superior civilizations to control inferior ones. Needless to say, such an approach has continued to exert influence on realpolitik, giving rise, for one thing, to the hostility against idols.

4. Conclusions

From ancient to contemporary times, discourses on monotheism and polytheism have not been restricted to religious dimensions, including the understanding of God/gods, but have reached into the relationship between religion and political sovereignty as well as the norms

and values in a society. Simply put, the discourses ask us which values we should follow. Nowadays, the global economy advocates freedom from any particular value, while religious fundamentalists stress the importance of a transcendental value. Meanwhile, the modern notion of the nation-state is coming under heavy attack from both sides.

To the modern West, traditional fixed values, especially those dependent on religion, have been seen as “idols” to destroy. To people who regard religious values highly, like strict Islamists, the wave of Western modernization, which places too much emphasis on human sovereignty, has been regarded as an “idol” to avoid. As a result, each embodiment of iconoclasm is triggering a conflict of values with the other.

Such a conflict of values is not only seen in the relationship between the West and the Islamic world, but also in the relationship between America and Europe in realpolitik. In America, not a few people are calling for “freedom to believe,” while in Europe, “freedom from religion” has been viewed as a premise for the formation of the modern state. In America, it is thought that there is a danger that the nation itself will become an idol, and that religions assume the role of protecting individuals from the intervention of the nation. In Europe after the Enlightenment, on the other hand, a nation was thought to be responsible for protecting individuals from the intervention of religions, and since that time people have been cautious about the potential power of religions. Despite the conflict between such basic notions, however, both America and Europe are committed to promoting the tolerance of multicultural values. But at the same time, it is becoming evident that the tolerance implied by multiculturalism will not smoothly lead to a solution for contemporary clashes of values. This is because there are many people in Europe as well as in America who take a doubtful or hostile view of the Enlightenment, which in effect gave birth to multiculturalism. Similarly, it is evident that we cannot find effective solutions to these problems simply by repeatedly saying that polytheism is more “tolerant” than monotheism.

In this paper, I have maintained that the direct violence of realpolitik, including wars, conflicts, and terrorist attacks, can be understood in part as a counteraction to structural violence. Such structural violence does exist in religious dimensions, such as idolatry and eschatology, as well as in social dimensions, such as Social Darwinism, and it is of extreme importance to recognize such multidimensionality.

Such multidimensional structural violence is also hidden in the discourse on monotheism and polytheism. This means that an understanding of polytheism as peaceful and cooperative religions that can sublimate the violence of monotheism runs the risk of developing into violent discourses that produce prejudice and hatred, despite their original intentions. This is not because believers in polytheistic religions take an insulting attitude toward monotheism, but because the discourse itself, as a combination of Occidentalism and reverse Orientalism, continues to proliferate the functions of replacing, extending, and inverting a certain image, as in the case of idolatry. Such a proliferation process could be accelerated by

ranking monotheism below polytheism in an evolutionary hierarchy, as is done by Umehara. Regardless of whether monotheistic civilizations are viewed as superior to polytheistic civilizations or vice versa, such a hierarchically-ranked, fixed image could serve as a breeding ground for “invisible idolatry,” and eventually “structural violence,” as I discussed earlier.

In this paper, I opted to deal with the issue of idolatry as a “detour” to prevent the discussion on monotheism and polytheism from developing directly into a discourse of violence. While the prohibition of idolatry is usually understood as an exclusive principle that makes a sharp distinction between monotheism and polytheism, this paper focuses instead on its structural function to provide a linkage between monotheism and polytheism and associate them with each other. In other words, I avoided the method of “externalizing” the risk of idolatry and forcing it onto the “other,” or polytheism. Accordingly, I did not argue against the image of polytheism as a “tolerant” form of religion, which frequently appears in the discourse on monotheism and polytheism, by referring to the evidence of numerous historical rebuttals,³⁰⁾ but faced the structural problem inherent in the discourse instead. Through this process, I caught a glimpse of the fact that this kind of discourse includes in itself Japan’s specific historical background, and that it also reflects certain universal problems of an international society that has been unable to fully control the emergence of a violent discourse.

NOTES

- 1) Takeshi Umehara, *Mori no Shisou ga Jinrui wo Sukuu* (Shogakukan, 1995), p. 158.
- 2) Keiji Iwata, *Kami to Kami — Animism Uchuu no Tabi* (Kodansha, 1989), p. 280.
- 3) Soho Machida, *Jutsugoteki Ronri to 21 Seiki*, (*Aimai no Chi*, ed. Hayao Kawai and Shinichi Nakazawa, Iwanami Shoten, 2003), p. 138.
- 4) Ken Sakamura, *Ubiquitous Computer Kakumei – Jisedai Shakai no Sekai Hyojun* (Kadokawa Shoten, 2002), p. 13.
- 5) Shu Kishida and Toru Kotaki, *America no Seigi-byo, Islam no Genri-byo – Isshinkyo no Byori wo Yomitoku* (Shunjusha, 2002), p. 236.
- 6) Takeshi Yoro, *Baka no Kabe* (Shinchosha, 2003), pp. 193-195.
- 7) Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 16.
- 8) *ibid.*, p. 20.
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 176.
- 10) David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Natural History of Religion*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (New York, Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 26-32.
- 11) Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. L. J. Walker (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 277-280.
- 12) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. M. Cranston (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 176-187.
- 13) Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols (Nietzsche Zenshu*, Vol. 4, Hakusuisha, 1987), pp. 11-155, mainly pp. 49-56.

- 14) Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage, 1979/1994), p. 40.
- 15) *ibid.*, pp. 59-60, 60.
- 16) The “reverse Orientalism” discussed in this paper is similar to fundamentalism in a broad sense. For example, Kenichi Matsumoto maintains that fundamentalism is “an ideological vector with which to resist the West = modernization, and set a civilizational principle to transcend the West” (*Genrishugi – Fundamentalism*, Fujinsha, 1992, p. 9). This understanding is also applicable to “reverse Orientalism.” Yet, treating “fundamentalism” as connected to Orientalism or Occidentalism can cause conceptual confusion. Therefore, for simplicity’s sake, in this paper I opt to use the term “reverse Orientalism” in place of fundamentalism.
- 17) Arya Samaj is a religious organization established in Bombay in 1875. To protect Hinduism from the aggression of the West, they denounced the multiplicity of Hindu gods and their idolatry, and promoted a monotheistic doctrine, maintaining that the gods invoked in the Vedas are different manifestations of One God, Brahman (Tadashi Ogawa, *Genri-shugi towa Nanika – America, Chuto kara Nihon made*, Kodansha, 2003, pp. 163-164). Interestingly, the attempt to integrate polytheistic gods into One God bears a certain similarity to Japan’s nationalist movement in the modern age.
- 18) Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 13.
- 19) Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. N. Goldblum (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 242-250.
- 20) Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, trans. Juichi Katsura (Iwanami Shoten, 1978), pp. 82-86. To be precise, what Bacon means by “idola” is “phantasm” or “illusion,” and I don’t think it appropriate to translate the word as “idol.”
- 21) *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. L. D. Easton and K. H. Cuddat (New York, Doubleday, 1967), pp. 245-246, as quoted in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, p. 243.
- 22) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, Manuscript 213 and 413, as quoted in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, p. 244.
- 23) Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, p. 241.
- 24) Hiroshi Ichikawa, *Yudaya-kyo-no Seisin Kozo* (University of Tokyo Press), p. 146.
- 25) In the case of Islam, the extension model is seen in the concept of “*jahiliyah*.” Originally, *jahiliyah* meant the age of ignorance before Islam was revealed to mankind by the Prophet Muhammad. In the 20th century, however, this term was redefined as a “state of society that can exist at any time,” inspired by the thought of Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb. By doing so, Muslims aimed to resist secularity and westernization, and in this sense, *jahiliyah* of the contemporary age is closely associated with Occidentalism.
- 26) Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit’s *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism* (London, Atlantic Books, 2004), discusses such an aspect of Japanese modern history from the viewpoint of Occidentalism, and makes an interesting comparison with other cases.
- 27) Robert N. Bellah, “Seventy-Five Years,” in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, ed., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11 (The South Atlantic Quarterly 101:2)* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2002), p. 261.
- 28) Johan Galtung, *Kozoteki Boryoku to Heiwa*, trans. Sakio Takayanagi et al., (Chuo University

- Press, 1991), p. 5.
- 29) Mark Juergensmeyer named such a state of war a “cosmic war” and indicates that not only is it behind violence, but it also gives a reason to exercise violence. See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000), pp. 145-163.
- 30) Evidence that denies the tolerance of polytheistic societies includes the facts that the most extreme anti-Christian measures were taken by the Tokugawa Shogunate, and that not a few sects of Shintoism, which is viewed as a representative of polytheistic religions, took an attitude of rejecting other religions in Japan and abroad in the modern age. Nobutaka Inoue refers to the fact that Sectarian Shintoism took a hostile attitude against Christianity in the modern age, and, at the same time, points out that Shrine Shintoism, Sectarian Shintoism, and new religions of Shinto origin in the modern age had varying levels of tolerance, indicating variability within the tradition of Shintoism. See Nobutaka Inoue, *Kindai Shinto no System to Shukyoteki Kanyo (Shukyo to Kanyo – Ishukyo Ibunka no Taiwa ni Mukete*, ed. Seiichi Takeuchi and Akio Tsukimoto, Daimeido, 1993), pp. 125-144. Accordingly, it is evident that we cannot simply categorize Shintoism as a “tolerant polytheistic religion.” Koji Suga’s *Nihon Tochika no Kaigai Jinja – Chosen Jingu, Taiwan Jinja to Saishin* (Kobundo, 2004) discusses in detail the issues of forced visits to Shinto shrines in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the destruction of shrines overseas at the end of WWII.