

Throughout its history, Christianity has been making efforts to evangelize the world. This can be considered an effort of missionaries to assimilate the people of the world to their own spiritual model. However, I think it is now time to move beyond such simple missiology in Christianity.

Discourses and Realpolitik on Monotheism and Polytheism

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1. Introduction

In my presentation, I will first introduce trends in Japan and the West concerning monotheism and polytheism. Next, I will compare idolatry with Orientalism. Finally, I will examine the destructive effects of idolatry upon realpolitik.

2. Trends in Japan and the West

Commentaries on “monotheism and polytheism” are being heard with increasing frequency from various platforms in Japan. This trend has become particularly noticeable since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

For example, Takeshi Umehara, who is well known as a pioneer in the field of Japanese culture, makes the following comments: “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” (*Mori no Shisou ga Jinrui wo Sukuu* [The Idea of the Forest will Save Mankind], Shogakukan, 1995, p. 158).

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 and the destruction of nature. 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 an extremely simple one, and one that has captured the hearts of many people. In the midst of a continuing economic downturn, many people have difficulty in finding a clear national identity, and it may be natural for Japanese people to open their hearts to the possibilities of a polytheistic approach that surpasses the monotheistic civilization of the West.

The importance of this polytheistic approach has been emphasized even further since the start of the war in Iraq, in which the logic of George W. Bush is often seen as a logic of monotheism. The pacifism that is rooted in Japanese society has a tendency to see monotheistic logic as the enemy of peace.

The comments that have been made about monotheism and polytheism are too numerous to count, but they might 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 conflict and clashes.
- ii) Many of the problems of the modern world can be attributed to monotheism (monotheistic civilizations), and thus polytheism (polytheistic civilizations, such as Japan) should overcome the limitations of monotheistic thought and contribute to the resolutions of these problems.
- iii) While monotheistic religions are exclusive, self-righteous, warlike, and destructive of nature, polytheistic religions are all-encompassing, harmonious, friendly, and supportive of coexistence with nature.

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* (1997) as a recent example. She argues that monotheism is responsible for the long legacy of violence in the West, a claim that has ignited controversy. According to her, the connection between monotheism's belief in a transcendent other (God) and the formation of a monotheistic identity in opposition to others is the root of monotheism's violence. She maintains that the monotheistic identity reflects a narrative of "scarcity" and that the desire for a finite amount of identity, like finite territory, has caused violence. 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." (*The Curse of Cain*, p. 176)

The discourse on monotheism and polytheism in Japan looks very similar to that in the West, and they do share common interests. Each discourse, however, is rooted in different historical origins. On the one hand, the discourse in Japan has often been related to nationalism, with its mission to resist the modern; and now, we may speak of the "postmodern" challenge to the Western World. On the other hand, the discourse in the West comes mainly from the Enlightenment. Consequently, the trend to reject transcendental value and instead

embrace pluralism arises from “modern” impulses. Most likely, Schwartz would consider her interpretation a “postmodern” one, but her idea is based on the claims of the Enlightenment, no matter how controversial her interpretation might be. Therefore, the discourse in the West represented by Schwartz is the current style of the “modern” stream of criticism.

3. Idolatry and Orientalism

From a historical perspective, cultural structures that criticize monotheism and support polytheism can be seen repeatedly in Japan’s recent history. That is to say, the approaches of the East, Asia, and Japan, which propose new values and thought systems that transcend the limitations of the West, appear and reappear in cycles that reflect the West’s repeated crises and spiritual and moral decline. Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978) clearly pointed out the problems inherent in these types of comments, which place the East and the West in opposition 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 by the West over the East, 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.” He recognizes that forcing a fixed negative image on a religion becomes a tool of control.

In Orientalism, a fixed image has destructive effects, and the forcing of a negative image can result in a violent reaction. In the modern world, the images generated by Orientalism, as well as Occidentalism—fixed images the East has placed on the West—are subject to mass production through the mass media, including the Internet. The proliferation of images, however, is by no means a problem unique to the modern world. In the tradition of monotheistic religions, this mechanism of “absolutizing” the self and subjugating others corresponds to “idolatry.” It is for this reason that idolatry has become the subject of harsh criticism in the tradition of monotheistic religions. The “prohibition on idolatry” is not only a tradition common to all three 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 Judaism, the prohibited worship of other gods is called Avodah Zarah, but this 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 Christian 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)" (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 13).

Tillich wrote *Systematic Theology* in 1951, but the importance of understanding religious nationalism as idolatry has increased dramatically since the events of 9/11. As Tillich's words clearly indicate, all men and all religions are at risk of becoming the subject 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 the problem that it is. Tillich recognized the danger of absolutizing the nation 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 on idolatry that has become popular among certain Islamists who are hostile to Western society and its values. Considering that these current manifestations of anti-idolatry share theoretical underpinnings with Tillich's ideals, we cannot be content with his formulations.

At the least, we should recognize that no kind of lessons or formulations can eradicate idolatry. Monotheistic faith inherently includes the risk of idolatry. Since the biblical age, faith in God is inseparable from idolatry, not only conceptually but also in the daily practice of faith. If we lack this recognition, externalize the inherent risk, and superimpose it on others, violent discourse will inevitably erupt.

4. Reconsideration of Idolatry in Realpolitik

In the modern world, when all events are transformed into visual images, all events 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.

Since 9/11, 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 either case, there is an aspect 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." ("Seventy-Five Years", Stanley Hauerwas, Frank Lentricchia, ed., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11*, 2002, p. 261)

As Bellah points out, the image of good and evil reverses and proliferates with ease. This, in essence, is the demonic power of idolatry. In the modern world, capitalism extends itself with the power of proliferation and impacts the entire world, and if capitalism comes in the form of military intervention, then it is no surprise that the persons subjected to that suppression 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 violence in order to stand up against that violence.

This view took on 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 those idols’ destruction. What can we do to prevent the repetition of iconoclasm that combines both despair and jubilation?

Discourse on monotheism and polytheism is not restricted to the religious dimensions, including the understanding of God/gods, but reaches into the relationship between religion and political sovereignty as well as norms and values in a society. Simply speaking, it matters which value one is to follow. Nowadays, the global economy advocates freedom from any particular value, while the religious fundamentalists stress the importance of a transcendental value. Meanwhile, the modern notion of the nation-state comes under heavy attack from both sides.

To the modern West, traditional values from before the Enlightenment, especially those dependent on religion, have been seen as idols to banish. To people who regard religious values highly, like strict Islamists, the wave of Western modernization, which emphasizes human sovereignty, has been regarded as an idol to avoid. As a result, both embodiments of iconoclasm are triggering conflicts of values with each other.

Meanwhile, in spite of contemporary conflicts, America and Europe can still cooperate in promoting the tolerance of multicultural values. But at the same time, it is becoming evident that the tolerance and permissiveness implied by multiculturalism cannot smoothly lead to solving contemporary value problems. This is because there are many people in Europe as well as in America who take a doubtful and hostile view of the Enlightenment, which in effect gave birth to multiculturalism.

Monotheism and polytheism/idolatry have had such complicated relationships with each other that they cannot be reduced to a simplified hierarchy. Therefore, it is necessary for some mediating agency to build a bridge over different spheres of values. In addition, deep insight into risk awareness regarding the concept of idolatry embedded in monotheism might make the fault lines between monotheistic religions the front lines for new dialogue.