

How Living in Japan Enriches My Understanding of Monotheistic Religions

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1. Introduction

As I explained in my presentation to a CISMOR seminar last June, I am a historian of American church history. Until four years ago I knew very little about Japan. In 1981 I visited Japan for about a week (meeting people in theological education in Tokyo and Kyoto). Four years ago, however, I returned to live in Japan as a “missionary associate” faculty member in the Graduate School of American Studies at Doshisha University in Kyoto. In this position I have been teaching about American religious history and life to Japanese students. My area of scholarly expertise remains focused upon religion in the United States, especially monotheistic religion.

I have organized this presentation into two general areas. First, I will spend most of my time exploring four aspects of monotheism that I believe are important. I always thought these things were important when I lived in the United States, but now after living four years in Japan I have a new awareness of some core ideas that are central to monotheistic religions. Unlike some Asian scholars who may argue that monotheism is too narrow and exclusive for the modern world, I want to affirm monotheism as an important way of looking at the world. When monotheism is strong it helps human communities maintain respect and thrive. In the past, living in a predominantly monotheistic society, I had taken certain things for granted. After living in Japan I am able to examine my religious perspective more carefully. This process has enriched and deepened my understanding.

Second, I will spend a few minutes at the end sharing some of my appreciation for Japanese religions and society. In Western history, cultures that are not monotheistic have been judged inferior. They have been called “primitive,” “heathen,” “pagan,” and “reprobate.” Christian missionaries have believed that they had a responsibility to civilize and convert such people in order to “save” their souls. Christians have not only tried to evangelize non-Christians, but they have sometimes rejected the cultural and intellectual treasures of non-monotheistic civilizations. Furthermore, Christians have also condemned other monotheists, such as Muslims and Jews, and asserted that only Christianity has truth. During my time in Japan I have developed new understanding of Japanese religious traditions. I do

not want to call them “polytheistic,” because I do not believe that “belief in one god or many gods” is the distinguishing difference between Japanese religiosity and monotheistic religions. I will explain more about this later.

Now let me turn to four aspects of monotheistic religions that are clearer to me after my four years in Japan. Please understand that I am not an expert in religious studies. I am a historian. However, my experience in Japan has made me more appreciative of four things about Christianity and other monotheistic religions: First, I have a deeper awareness of monotheistic textual and legal affirmations and the importance of religious diversity in their view of creation. Second, I am newly mindful of how monotheistic views of human nature influence social values and change. Third, I have greater appreciation for the ways in which monotheistic religions empower women for public responsibility. Fourth, I have new insight about how monotheistic religions initially protected themselves by promoting toleration, but later moved to support religious pluralism and to applaud shared participation in a multi-religious society.

2. Textual and Legal Affirmations of the Importance of Diversity

I believe that the textual and legal foundations of monotheism are extremely important. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common story of beginnings. They uphold a message of the unity of creation called into being by one God. Their scriptures tell about a great flood that nearly killed everyone, but one man, Noah, was saved with his family. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all read and retell the story that after the flood God promised life to Noah and his descendants. The rainbow is a symbol of their common humanity.

I have been influenced by the writings of Jonathan Sacks and his recent book, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002). Sacks, who is the Chief Rabbi of United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (or United Kingdom), argues that the monotheistic view of the beginnings of the world set forth by Jews, Christians, and Muslims is radically different from Western philosophy based on Greek thought. In Greek philosophical works writers focus upon what human beings have in common in order to discover and justify universal rights and laws. Philosophers seek to show how human beings can recognize their common rationality, common desires or emotions, and then devise laws to preserve society. Philosophers seek to overcome diversity in order to find and affirm universal ideas that can be affirmed by all people.

Monotheistic religions, however, interpret world history and humanity differently. Monotheistic religions begin with the idea of one humanity, but when human beings aspire to be like God, God becomes deeply troubled by the arrogance of humanity. Scriptures explain that God stops the whole project—confusing the language of the people and scattering them (as the Hebrew text reports it) into many tribes all over the earth. Fortunately, when this

happened, God's covenant with humanity did not end. According to Sacks, God is repeatedly "teaching humanity to make space for difference." God reminds human beings that God is found in the human other, the one not like us, the stranger. "Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one gateway to His presence. To the contrary, it is the idea that the unity of God is to be found in the diversity of creation" (53).

The scriptures of all monotheistic religions contain this message in various ways. Jesus teaches his followers that God has created Samaritans, blind beggars, women, and tax collectors. All of them are children of God. All are neighbors and should be treated with respect. Repeatedly, Jesus rejects human definitions of what is acceptable and unacceptable, clean and unclean. Jesus teaches that all people *in their differences* are acceptable to God. The Qur'an also reminds Muslims that Allah could have made humanity into a single people, but Allah did not do that. Allah made humanity into tribes and nations that they might know each other. Allah tests humanity to seek common truth in the midst of their disputes. (Sura 2:51)

In nature diversity is everywhere. There are thousands of species and thousands of languages. God the Creator is one, but creation is many. In monotheistic religions God is not some philosophic or scientific concept above creation. God is the merciful loving parent of diverse humanity. The idea of God as father or parent is important. Parents do not love children "in general," they love particular children—their children. And the most wonderful thing about good parents is that they love each child in different and appropriate ways. Children are all different, but with good parents children can trust that God affirms their differences and loves them in their diversity.

People sometimes think that monotheistic religions focus upon unity—the oneness of God. But in actual fact monotheistic religions affirm differences, not unity. God is one, but creation is filled with variety. Sachs writes,

The trust at the beating heart of monotheism is that God transcends the particularities of culture and the limits of human understanding. [God] is my God but also the God of all [humankind], even of those whose customs and way of life are unlike mine. That is not to say that there are many gods. That is polytheism. Nor is it to say that God endorses every act done in [God's] name. On the contrary: a God of your side as well as mine must be a God of justice who stands above us both, teaching us to make space for one another, to hear each other's claims and to resolve them equitably. Only such a God would be truly transcendent—greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe capable of being comprehended in any human language, from any single point of view. Only such a God could teach [humankind] to make peace other than by conquest and conversion, and as something nobler than practical necessity. (*Dignity of Difference*, 65)

Unfortunately, in human history monotheistic religions have not always affirmed the importance of diversity. In reaction against tribalism, Christians (and Muslims) have often promoted exclusive universalism. Christian universalism and Muslim universalism have argued that there is only one God, and that this means that there is only one way, one creed—for all humanity. In short, they have claimed that their way is the only way.

But monotheism does not necessarily lead to exclusivism. Judaism is a radically monotheistic religion, but Judaism accepts the fact that one God may relate to other peoples and tribes differently. Judaism shows that it is possible to believe in one God and at the same time to affirm that the one God requires different things from different people.

Within the three Abrahamic religions there are written laws, commentaries, and scholarly traditions to guide religious practice. Jews keep the law (the Torah), Christians follow ecclesiastical assumptions and theological creeds, and Muslims value the importance of the Sharia. I am not a “fundamentalist Christian” concerned with biblical inerrancy. I believe that scriptures are from God, but they are always read by finite human beings who do not always understand the meaning of texts. If I can misunderstand my husband’s words in ordinary conversation, I am not surprised when textual interpretation among people of faith does not always agree.

During my time in Japan I have developed a new appreciation for the importance of texts and legal traditions among monotheistic religions. I believe that when basic religious ideas are written down and religious scholars and teachers communicate about texts, there is greater potential for understanding differences and building meaningful community. Monotheistic texts have sometimes been used to deny the humanity of those in different religions. But written monotheistic texts and laws can also protect the dignity of difference in a world where diversity dominates.

3. Monotheistic Views of Human Nature

During my time in Japan I have also become more sensitive to the importance of monotheistic views of human nature. Asian societies, influenced by Confucian traditions, have a very positive view of human nature. One of my students in my course on American Thought helped me to see this contrast by quoting Confucian thought. He said that Asians believe that “all humanity is good and always striving to be better, be loyal, and live upright.” If people are taught the right thing, they will do the right thing. This is why education is so important in Asian societies.

With this rather optimistic view of human nature, Asian cultures are very demanding, expecting perfection and blaming severely when anyone makes a mistake. If something goes wrong it is assumed that education failed, but the person remains basically good. Standards are high and expectations sometimes unrealistic. Japan, and other Asian societies, are cultures of blame and shame.

Monotheistic religions create a different culture. They give mixed messages about human nature. On the one hand they affirm that all humanity is created in the “image of God,” and therefore each person is holy—a child of God. At the same time, monotheistic religions are more realistic about human weakness. Human beings want to do well, but they forever fall short. No matter how hard human beings try, they fail. This is because monotheism recognizes that evil and selfishness always taint the best actions of human beings. Human beings are sinners, not merely because they do wrong things, but because their will to love is forever distorted by their will to power. Human evil is real. In Christianity, according to theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, “it is not the eternal [good human] who judges the finite [human]; but the eternal and holy God who judges sinful [humanity]” (*Nature and Destiny of Man*, 22).

Monotheistic religions believe that human beings have both good and bad nature. Weakness and wrongdoing are part of human nature. Therefore, expectations must be realistic. I think that monotheistic religions leave a lot more room for mistakes, forgiveness, and tolerance of failure. Laws and governments in monotheistic societies are more practical, building social and political structures to limit the impact of evil (viewed as inevitable) rather than depending on idealistic standards that few people can maintain. Above all there is forgiveness for being human, even if someone has to pay a price for making a mistake.

Japanese government and businesses demand a great deal and expectations of perfection are strong. For some people suicide often becomes the only way to save face after a major mistake. Yet, failures still occur. Corruption is common. Human greed and selfishness distort the goodness of humanity. I am not surprised that Japanese people are weak, selfish, and greedy like Americans. They are human. However, because Japanese society tends to blame rather than forgive, people become very cynical. They know that humanity is not perfect. They believe, however, that everyone should be. So they end up watching evil repeat itself, and there is little opportunity for healing and renewal. There are two sayings in my culture that highlight the differences that I am describing. People say, “Shit happens.” This simply means that bad things happen. That’s life. And the second saying is: “To err is human, to forgive Divine.” This saying reminds us that everyone will make mistakes because they are human and in need of God’s forgiving love.

My student wrote that if people believe that human nature is both good and bad, extreme forms of judgement are reduced. Asians believe in the goodness of human nature, so when someone makes a mistake, it is normal to think that that person is bad. But if people start with the idea that it is possible to do right *and to do wrong*, people may help each other keep on the right road instead of standing aside and blaming the wrongdoer.

This is so true. When something bad happens in Japan, someone must always be blamed. The evening news is filled with stories about problems and efforts to determine blame for something that should not have happened. To rectify a wrong someone must pay money,

apologize, resign, or somehow make amends. If an accident happens or a product fails, some person or some company is at fault. There is zero tolerance for error. There is an assumption that every action and product can be and will be correct and perfect.

Western monotheistic thinkers are more realistic about human nature. Within Greco-Roman traditions and embedded in the teachings of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is a recognition of the limitations of human nature and the need for communal monitoring and/or Divine grace and forgiveness. Human nature is flawed, and human communities dare not forget that fact.

After four years in Japan, I have a new appreciation for the monotheistic religious understanding of human nature. I think that monotheistic anthropology is healthier and more hopeful than Confucian assumptions about human nature. When religious people believe that human nature is flawed, they help each other and they structure society to prevent problems before they happen. They encourage people to forgive mistakes and move beyond problems. However, when a culture has a very high view of human nature and assumes that everyone will do well (but they fail), shame and blame limit the capacity of that society to prevent problems and correct mistakes.

4. Empowering Women for Public Responsibilities

During my four years in Japan I have taught courses about women in America and tried to help my students understand the role of women. From my research in women's history I have decided that monotheistic religious ideas and movements have had a large influence on the development of women in American society. When I compare the history of women in America with the history of women in Japan, I think that monotheistic religions account for some of the differences.

Beginning with the sixteenth century, Protestant Christian reformers argued that every Christian needed to read the Bible rather than depend upon the teachings of male church leaders. "Sola Scriptura" (only Scripture) could be trusted. Protestantism made great efforts, therefore, to make sure that all men and women could read and write in order to study the Bible and understand religious teachings for themselves. Protestants promoted Bible reading for women and put a great deal of emphasis on education in the home. Although there were differences between the social roles of men and women, no distinction was made between the salvation of men and women. Furthermore, old theological ideas that women were dangerous sources of evil sexuality, or "daughters of Eve," faded. In America, Christianity developed a very lofty and idealistic view of women.

By the nineteenth century, well-educated white middle class religious women were highly valued. Following an ideal called the "cult of true womanhood" or the "cult of domesticity," American men and women believed that women were naturally pious (very religious), pure

(free of sexual lust), submissive, and domestic. “True” women, they thought, needed to stay home as pious, pure, submissive, and domestic wives and mothers. When they did this they would protect society from the evils of the secular world by raising their children and reminding their husbands of proper faith and morality.

The idea of “true womanhood” was a stereotype and an ideal. Many women did not fit the ideal. Immigrant Jewish women, Roman Catholic women, and African American women often worked outside the home. Poor women had jobs on farms and in factories. Yet, the ideal remained that women were keepers of true womanhood and true religion. This ideal shaped the development of American women’s history.

As American society industrialized and expanded, American women used the ideal of “true womanhood” to justify increasing their social and political influence. Women, they said, needed to extend their roles as keepers of domestic and religious values beyond the home, because the world was their “home.” By the end of the nineteenth century, women became teachers and missionaries and church workers. They worked for changes in society, but always said that they were doing everything for “hearth and home.”

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the public roles of women expanded. They moved from private work as homemakers and religious volunteers into public settings—grounding their efforts in monotheistic religious beliefs that love and service flowed naturally from their faith. Later they added political ideas of equality and democratic responsibility. Finally, in the twentieth century feminist activists began to advocate for equal female political participation and social status.

When I look at the history of women in Japan, things developed differently. I am not sure that I completely understand what happened, but I know that during the Meiji era there was a blending of traditional Confucian family power relations—between husband and wife and mother and child—with nationalistic goals. The ideology of “good wives and wise mothers” promoted women’s role in the reproduction and socialization of children, and as passive supporters of a “wealthy country and strong army.” According to a recent book, *Feminism in Modern Japan* (2003) by Vera Mackie,

Japanese governments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century prevented women from attending or speaking at public meetings. Even after such formal restrictions were relaxed, notions of suitable feminine behavior resulted in ridicule of women who attempted to address political issues in public forums. Women who venture[d] into public space [were] seen to be transgressing a conceptual boundary.... (5) Bureaucrats argued that “women’s participation would undercut home management and education,” and that women’s virtue would be compromised by such “disreputable” activities as public meetings. (29)

During the Meiji period, therefore, women who received any education beyond needlework and household tasks were those who attended Christian schools. In the 1870s the percentage of women attending grade schools was half that of men and an even lower percentage had any higher education. Unfortunately, as the imperialistic and militaristic aspirations of Japan became more aggressive during the first half of the twentieth century, attitudes reinforcing women's secondary status were reinforced.

After the war, the new Japanese Constitution removed formal obstacles to women's public roles, but the terrible hunger and housing needs of postwar Japanese families pushed Japanese women back into the domestic sphere. The old ideal of "good wives and wise mothers" persisted. Although women voted and a handful of women were elected to the Diet, the majority of Japanese women did not consider themselves equal with men. Last month in my course on "Women and Contemporary Theology," when I asked my students (all female) to write some comments on women's place in church and society and to answer the question, "where do women belong?" one student wrote: "Historically women belong under men. It is said that men are supposed to keep women and kids in control and in this society this value is still in people's mind." She went on to say, however, "my idea is that women and men belong in the same position."

In contemporary Japan the idea of women's equality still seems to lack social and cultural support. Young Japanese women aspire to careers and at the same time they think that careers are impossible for women. Confucian traditions related to women's role are still very strong.

On the other hand, monotheistic religious traditions seem to help Japanese women imagine more independent lives. This surprises me, because at times Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have severely oppressed women. I am personally very critical of Christian patriarchy. Yet, within monotheistic religions Jewish women, Christian women, and Muslim women have strong traditions of independence and responsibility for family, society, and community. After four years in Japan I am newly impressed with the positive impact of monotheistic religions on the role of women.

5. Religious Diversity and Pluralism

My final point relates to the response of monotheistic religions in America to religious diversity, or pluralism. In this analysis I am grateful for the work of William R. Hutchison in his recent book *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (2003).

Hutchinson begins with what all historians of religion in America say over and over. The majority of European settlers who came to America before the revolutionary war were Christian Protestants. By the early 1800s, however, Roman Catholics and a small number of Jews arrived, and by 1900 the religious variety of America was extremely complex. In the 1950s sociologist Will Herberg described American religion as "Protestant, Catholic and

Jew.” Finally in the last half of the twentieth century (after major changes in U.S. immigration laws in 1965), Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and other religious sub-groups arrived in great numbers. The dominant religious perspective of America has remained monotheistic, but the mix is extraordinary. Professor Diana Eck at Harvard University describes this development in her important book, *A New Religious America* (2001), which is subtitled, *How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.

Hutchison says that religious diversity has produced an ideology of religious pluralism. As different religious groups came to America and they learned to live together, most religious groups believed that they were right and others were wrong. They “established” their religion as central and banned or marginalized others. They felt that religious diversity was dangerous. Yet, very early in American history, the idea of toleration developed. Americans wrote into the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” They did this, not because they thought that diversity was good (they did not), but because they knew that only by tolerating others would they be able to maintain their own religious freedom. It was a practical solution to guarantee their own survival.

This idea of religious freedom was a radical idea. In the history of most cultures (Japan included) people have considered “diversity” dangerous. One legal historian writes:

[F]ew thinkers and fewer political or religious leaders in world history have considered diversity to be anything but a threat that should be suppressed or contained. Even today, most societies would view the claim that diversity is a social virtue as subversive, if not suicidal, nonsense. For them toleration is but a survival tactic, a temporary expedient. Even in more liberal societies, toleration is a mild, though essential, sentiment. . . . and *tolerating* diversity is not at all the same as *celebrating* and *promoting* it. (Peter Shuck, *Diversity in America* [2003], 5-6)

Hutchison argues that what began as toleration moved, by the early twentieth century, to an acceptance and even eagerness to include diversity. By the twenty-first century many Americans believe that it is good to promote many different forms of religious participation. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have come to believe that it is not only necessary, but even desirable, to accept religious diversity. Exclusionary ideas (deeply embedded in monotheistic religions) have been challenged. And now, pluralism, initially defended as a practical necessity, has become a leading value in democratic ideology among monotheists in America. This is an amazing turn of events.

Not surprisingly, the movement from reluctant toleration to enthusiastic promotion is not embraced by everyone. There are Jews, Christians, and Muslims—particularly Christians and Muslims—who view pluralism as a betrayal of their faith. They assert that any recognition

of the truth claims of any religion other than their religion is unacceptable. They fear that they might have to compromise their loyalty to their tradition if they live in a pluralistic society.

There are other people who fear that the enthusiastic promotion of religious pluralism requires that they deny particular historic religious commitments and replace their religion with some form of religious syncretism that considers all religions to be different ways to the same God. There are still other people who have decided that religious convictions are no longer important.

Most followers of monotheistic religions today, however, are developing a new way of thinking that is mutually respectful and non-patronizing. They recognize that no one religion can impose its viewpoint on a multicultural society. They also affirm the stance of all monotheistic religions that human beings are only human, and therefore that human knowledge about God will never be complete. They insist that no single religion can ever claim that its institutions embody final exclusive truth *that denies the truth of another religion*. People may say that their religion is sufficient and complete and even final, but they can no longer say that they are chosen or saved or fulfilled and all others are lost. A religiously pluralistic view of the world among monotheistic religions has now developed a viewpoint that allows for the one God to redeem and save humanity in multiple ways.

6. Conclusions

So how do I relate these insights about monotheistic religions in the United States to my experience in Japan? This is hard to describe. Japanese people tell me that Japanese religious beliefs and practices blend Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian ideas. It is true that Japanese people pray to indigenous spirits for happiness in this world, follow Buddhist rituals related to death, and revere Confucian social structures and ethical guidelines. Some monotheists call Japanese religion “syncretistic” and “polytheistic,” but I am reluctant to do that. To me Japanese religiosity is not any kind of “theism.” It is a blend of customs sustained by communal and ethnic loyalties. In the individualistic hedonism of contemporary Japan it often lacks any religious passion, or what the theologian Paul Tillich calls “ultimate concern.” Popular Japanese religion is not the worship of many gods, it is a basic unwillingness to have any “ultimate concern.”

During my time here I have looked for cohesion within Japanese religious practice. I confess that I have not found it. To me, popular Japanese religion seems superficial and recreational. Religious beliefs are a mixture of superstitious magic, selfish aspirations, and civic celebrations or festivals. Ethics and morality are based upon communal customs.

When ordinary Japanese people say that they are not religious, they are right in one sense. They indulge in religious practices, but they do not have what I would call religious convictions. They are generally unwilling to say that anything is right or wrong for religious

reasons. They determine actions based upon what will maintain harmony (*wa*), or what will serve their personal goals. Many people have told me that they do not respect Shinto and Buddhist religious practitioners, priests, or monks. They are cynical about religion. And when they meet religious people with strong convictions who make religious statements, they think that they are rude and they are fearful that they will do something bad.

Yet, living in this “a-religious” or “non-religious” culture has been good for me. After four years I still do not speak or read the Japanese language. However, in my ignorance of the language I have found that my non-verbal sensitivity has been enhanced. I have a new awareness of and appreciation for the aesthetic dimensions of life. Japanese culture is acutely sensitive to non-verbal messages. Social gestures, gardens, brush writing, flower arranging, tea ceremony, food presentation and many art forms—from Noh theater to pottery—communicate without words, or with very few words. I like this because it has forced me to do more than “think” about religion. Ultimately, I believe that all human language about the Divine dimensions of life is inadequate, and living in Japan has reinforced this conviction.

During my time here I have read a great deal about Japanese religions and what scholars say about them. I like many of the ideas of Shinto and Buddhism. I respect the intellectual traditions of these religions, but my conversations about religion have not been with scholars.

I have talked with ordinary people and I am troubled by the way most Japanese people think about religion, both their own religions and monotheistic religions. I believe that many Japanese people are totally out-of-date in their understanding of contemporary monotheism. They think that to be religious (especially monotheistic) means that one must affirm one God and judge all other beliefs or other ways of life to be wrong. This is simply not what is happening in contemporary America. It may have been true in the past, but today many contemporary monotheists do not think that everyone else is wrong. They are convinced that the one God, who has shown them how to live faithfully as Jews, Christians, or Muslims, supports other ways of being religious. Contemporary monotheists living with the religious pluralism of America confess their personal conviction as a preference, not as a judgement! Let me say that again: *Contemporary monotheists living with the religious pluralism of America confess their personal conviction as a preference, not as a judgement.*

So I close with a word of thanks to Japan. During my time here I have been able to clarify my understanding of what it means to be a monotheist. I choose to witness to my understanding of the one God as a Christian, without judging others as wrong. I do not say (and many monotheists no longer say) that everyone must agree with me or they are lost. I know that missionaries in the past said that. I know that some Christians and Muslims today say that. But to me, God is a great mystery. None of us will ever know God perfectly. I believe that we can all affirm a belief in the one God without judging each other.