

Can Freedom of Expression and Religious Sanctity Co-Exist?

Opening Greetings

Katsuhiro Kohara

Open Symposium

“Can Freedom of Expression and Religious Sanctity Co-Exist? : Some Lessons Learned from the Attacks in Paris and Copenhagen”

Date and time: March 14, 2015 (Saturday) 1:00-3:30 PM

Place: Classroom #107, Ryoshinkan Bldg., Imadegawa Campus, Doshisha University

Lecturers: Seiichi Kondo (Former Secretary of the Agency for Cultural Affairs,
UNESCO Ambassador, Ambassador to Denmark, Associate Professor,
Doshisha University),
Keisuke Kikuchi (Associate Professor, Graduate School for Global Studies,
Doshisha University)

Commentator: Hirotsugu Aida (Columnist, Kyodo News)

Moderator: Katsuhiro Kohara (Professor, School of Theology, Doshisha University)

The Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR) has as its goal the comprehensive study of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The individual research of each of these religions has a long history; and yet stimulating a dialogue between them is hardly a simple matter. We utilize an interdisciplinary approach involving the social issues that individuals living in monotheistic societies face, rather than just looking at each religion and its ideology. In other words, we seek to deal with this subject not only in theological and ideological terms, but also from the perspectives of a variety of disciplines including Area Studies, International Studies, Security Studies, Economics and History. The events that occur in monotheistic societies are conveyed daily in the form of news reports, but there are also aspects of monotheism that are nonetheless not well understood by Japanese society. One reason for this is that Japan has a very small number of followers of these religions: Christians, Muslims and Jews make up less than 1% of the Japanese population. Because we rarely come into contact with worshippers of these religions, it can be difficult to

grasp how these people really live. Consequently, we tend to stereotype individuals from these societies. An example can be seen in the deluge of reports on terrorist incidents, which results in Muslims being perceived as violent. We have decided to hold this lecture in an attempt to overcome such stereotypes and to gain a better understanding of the real circumstances behind these events.

On January 7, 2015, during an editorial meeting at the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, 11 people were shot and killed in an attack, including the editor-in-chief and caricaturist. Another shooting followed and, altogether, a total of 17 people were killed. Directly thereafter, large numbers gathered under the banner of freedom of expression, a highly esteemed value in France, and a parade and other events were held. Before the shock of this event could die down, ISIS carried out a hostage-taking event. An incident similar to the Paris attack took place on February 14, in Copenhagen, Denmark, at a discussion on Islam and freedom of expression. One person died and three police officers were injured. It turns out that an artist who had drawn a picture of the prophet Muhammad was at the meeting.

One pervading question in all of these events is whether, in protecting freedom of expression at all costs, these societies are consenting to there being no limits on freedom of expression. Naturally, a segment of the Muslim population was clearly opposed to the prophet Muhammad being caricatured. However, one could also voice the opinion that, "Terror aimed at freedom of expression is never to be condoned. And yet, we are definitely against the continued satirization of the prophet Muhammad." It is with the hope that we can somehow reconcile these competing points of view that we decided to hold this lecture.

Recall, this is not the first time that freedom of expression has come under attack. In 2005, *Jyllands-Posten*, a major Danish newspaper, published a caricature of the prophet Muhammad. Even though this image drew harsh rebuke, it was reprinted many times. Then, from 2005 to 2006, opposition boiled over to full-fledged, worldwide protests. The incidents that are the subject of this lecture occurred in Paris and Copenhagen, and it is hard to know whether they are the last such occurrences that we will witness.

Through this lecture, we hope to facilitate a multi-faceted view of freedom of expression and religious sanctity. It is hard to imagine that these events that have occurred in Europe would happen anytime soon in Japan. However, in recent years, even Japan has seen an escalation in arguments over freedom of expression. This is especially true of hate speech, which has gained much attention of late. We need to think long and hard about whether to allow hate speech based on freedom of expression, or to restrict

such language. In France, the calls for freedom of expression are loud and clear but such freedoms are not without their limits. In many European countries – not only France – one can be arrested for making anti-Semitic comments in a public place. It is my hope that this lecture will allow us all to think more deeply about the circumstances and issues surrounding freedom of speech.