

**International Politics from the Perspective of Monotheism:
Deciphering Katsuhiko Kohara's *What is Monotheism?*
A Primer on Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Heibonsha, 2018)**

Koji Murata

With apologies for inserting a word about myself at the beginning, this reviewer is a scholar of international politics. There are three topics within international politics which are extremely important, and regarding which many Japanese are regrettably unconcerned and uninformed. These three topics are 1) Religion, 2) Ethnicity, 3) Gender and Sexuality. As it turns out, these three topics have a very close interrelationship. For example, within American society, all three of these three topics have acquired multiple layers of nuance and constitute a major flash point for the mainstream white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male. These same issues are what helped propel Donald Trump to the presidency.

This paper examines the essence of monotheism, which is a very foreign concept for Japanese. In monotheism the direct relationship between God and individual is strongly emphasized. Even while acknowledging that polytheism values diversity, are we not frequently overlooking the perspective of monotheism?

For that reason, I find it advisable that not only scholars of religion but also we in the field of international politics also be more cognizant of this fact. In Japan, Doshisha professor emeritus Mori's cogent analysis of Christianity and its interface with American politics and diplomacy is one of just a few such pioneering analyses. In the West there are many analyses of the interrelationship between religion and international politics. For example, there is Douglas Johnston's (editor) *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, which I happen to own. Walter Russell Mead's *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, which elucidates American strategic diplomacy under the banner of "Divine Mercy," borrows the theme attributed to Prussia's iron-fisted Chancellor Otto von Bismarck who stated, "God has special mercy upon the drunkard, the fool, and America." Michael J. Green's recent publication, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783*, analyzes American foreign policy in Asia under the same theme of special divine providence.

American diplomacy, and its middle east policy in particular, is impossible to accurately assess apart from an understanding of religion's role. For instance, President

Jimmy Carter was a member of the pious Southern Baptist denomination and professed himself to be “born again” and President Ronald Reagan rode the political rise of the Religious Right and made it a major plank in both his policies and his public support. At around the same time, Israel’s conservative Zionist Likud party took the reigns of government, Pope John Paul II from Poland became pope of the Roman Catholic Church and supported the “righteous opposition” to communism. In 1979 Iran witnessed an Islamic revolution. From the beginning of modernity, “the revenge of religion,” (Gilles Kepel) which had retreated from the public face of politics, resurfaced.

There are approximately 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, and 14 million Jews; in other words, adherents of monotheism constitute approximately half of the world. However, Japanese adherents of Christianity constitute barely one percent of the population, while Muslim adherents constitute less than a quarter of one percent (0.24%, mostly Japanese wives of Muslim husbands). The number of Japanese converts to Judaism is estimated at approximately two thousand. Nonetheless, in accordance with the advance of globalism, the influence of monotheism has strengthened. It is said that if current trends continue, by the year 2060 approximately one percent of Japan will be foreigners; and most likely the majority of them will be adherents of monotheism.

As mentioned earlier, monotheism demands that adherents worship one god exclusively, which lends credence to the common charge of intolerance. Japanese society, polytheistic as it is, tends to be tolerant toward heterogeneity in matters of religion. This common myth has resolutely permeated the fabric of Japanese society. In prewar Japan, under the influence of state Shinto, England and America were demonized. This truth calls to mind the fact that even today, in Myanmar, for example, the political power of the Buddhist majority has been used to persecute the Rohingya Muslim minority—even though the common myth about the tolerance of polytheism should be easily dispelled. This reviewer has repeatedly argued that, rather than being tolerant of others (in this case, other religions), Japanese are simply indifferent. Reading this book reinforces this impression.

This book analyzes the three predominant monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, followed by an analysis of the relationship between monotheism and actual societies, as well as of monotheism in relation to Japanese society. Additionally, this book takes up in a well considered manner the perennial key topics of religious eschatology, just war theory, and separation of church and state.

For example, Christianity sees itself as “the new Jerusalem” which has rightly displaced “the old Jerusalem” of Judaism. That is why Christianity refers to the Hebrew

bible as the “Old Testament,” and the “New Testament” is viewed as having superceded, or in some circles, even supplanted the Old Testament. This stance is no doubt responsible in part for the antisemitism in Europe. Furthermore, Christianity’s pronouncement since the 19th century of Islam as anti-Christian has served to strengthen a sense of Christian superiority and to diminish the value of Islam. New Testament scripture (Hebrews 11: 1) states that “faith is the evidence of things hoped for, the certainty of things not seen;” yet this “certainty” has a flipside, namely bias and fallability.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush’s anti-terror and middle east policies have adopted a shade of “holy war.” The president prayed the iconic prayer of Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” I would like to point out that an oversimplified interpretation of the notion of self-sacrifice as mentioned in scripture historically has been misused by both church and state and has been internalized, in my opinion, by an unhealthy form of nationalism. The same form of nationalism might be seen as existing in the wartime state Shinto of Japan. In the same way that Shinto is not directly responsible for Japan’s famous kaimikaze suicide missions, mainstream Islam does not acknowledge jihadist terror. On the contrary, this reviewer deems the subtle idolatries of capitalism and nationalism as the greatest problems of our times. In fact, the World Trade Center was the epitome of capitalism, and the Pentagon the same of militancy and nationalism.

On the matter of separation of church and state, even though this term is frequently tossed about among scholars, there are significantly different shades of the concept. For example, the American experience with separation was quite different from the French one. In the American experience, Christianity is recognized as a type of quasi-national religion and the president is sworn into office by placing his hand on the Christian bible. In the French experience, however, Muslim women are forbidden from wearing a hajib at public schools. It is important to understand that there many variants of this historical concept.

This reveiwer finds the following excerpt to be worthy of citation. “In reviewing the key words of this book, it becomes clear that each one possesses a certain breadth of meaning (ambiguity, diversity) and can at times connote, if not denote, two or more meanings. In order to garner a full and robust understanding of monotheism, it is critical to realize that the same word or concept can engender completely different, even antithetical, interpretations and responses. Even if in one’s quest for means by which to practically deal with this conundrum one declares a “return to the source” or to “original doctrine,” that in itself is no guarantee of a univocal outcome. If this limitation in human

cognition is not taken into account, it will be all too easy for one party to pass judgment on another party.” (p. 218-19)

This point is especially apropos today when supreme leaders of superpowers nonchalantly and repeatedly employ “we versus them” dichotomous language. Yet, if we do some reflection, is it not the case that we also cast aspersions of “populism” and “anti-intellectualism” upon those who differ from our viewpoints and refuse to dialogue in favor of pronouncing judgment? Or, alternatively, are we not conveniently deceiving ourselves by supposing ourselves to be righteous in our denouncements of authority?

French literature scholar Kazuo Watanabe once raised the question of tolerance by ruminating, “Is it appropriate for tolerance to protect itself by being intolerant of intolerance? My conclusion is exceedingly simple and straightforward. For tolerance to preserve itself, it must not be intolerant of intolerance. The difference between a normal person and a deranged person is extremely subtle: the normal person refers to those people who remember that they too can at any moment become deranged—that they are not impervious to this plight. It is important firstly to consider the problem of tolerance and intolerance also in this light.” This book also considers the friction between tolerant cultures and cultures of intolerance and disdain, while explicating the necessity of confronting otherness.

No doubt before long various competing views not just on religion but also on race, gender, and sexuality will emerge in Japanese society. One reason for Japanese indifference toward the religious problem can probably be traced to the fact that minority issues have not yet been sufficiently discussed. But identity politics is knocking at the door. Just how tolerant and fair can we be toward divergent opinions?

For example, there are calls for state ratification of same sex marriage. Article 24 of Japan’s constitution states that “marriage shall be constituted exclusively by the mutual consent of both sexes and that both parties shall enjoy equal rights and must be maintained by mutual assistance.” The intent of this clause is to protect the status of woman; and because same sex marriage is not expressly prohibited, even without amending the constitution, simply reforming the existing law will be sufficient to permit same sex marriage. Many constitutional scholars and lawyers argue thus. In July of 2019, the Federation of Japanese Lawyers released an official statement in which it argued that Japan’s current prohibition of same sex marriage is in violation of articles 13 which guarantees the right to the pursuit of happiness and 14 which guarantees equal protection under the law, and so it is lobbying for the reform of relevant laws.

That position might in fact be the correct one; yet legal scholars and lawyers who

argue this also collectively argued just a few years ago that Article 9 of the constitution prohibits collective self-defense. The intent of Article 9 is to prohibit aggressive actions, and contrary to these scholars' opinion, it does not expressly prohibit collective self-defense. The war-renouncing language of Article 9 has its roots in the League of Nations' charter which criminalizes war and which is established on the premise that all aggression shall be prohibited. The right to collective defense is in fact permitted within the charter. Much less is there any legal basis in the charter for supposing that the right to individual self-defense is acknowledged but not collective self-defense. In this reviewer's eyes, the insistence that Article 24 permits same sex marriage but Article 9 does not permit collective self-defense seems like nothing more than a double standard. Being tolerant toward opposing opinions and value systems is easy to preach but difficult to practice. This is especially true of rhetorically skillful intellectuals.

This reviewer has written a cross-disciplinary book full of intellectual adventures entitled *The Politics of Religion*. Subsequently, I have published a book by the title *Fundamentals that One Should Know in Business: Deciphering the World through a Primer in "Religion"* and a book in dialogue format with President of Kyoto University Yamakoshi entitled *Origins of Humans and Birth of Religion: When Homo Sapiens Acquired "Faith"*. I have also devoted much energy to studying social enlightenment. I have also collaborated deeply with Mr. Kohara's leadership of the Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR) and Center for the Study of Conscience (CSC) at Doshisha and have engaged in various praxes. This new publication and its talking points stand on the shoulders of an author who is more than fit for the task.