

Can Religion Save Modern People?
Perspectives of Buddhism, Thoughts of Christianity,
Shizuka Sasaki and Katsuhiro Kohara (Heibonsha, 2020)

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The title of the book is provocative. Religion is generally considered to be “something that aims to bring salvation to people.” Since the title seems to ask “whether something that is aimed at the salvation of people can actually save people,” it appears to be asking a tautological question that points to the need for rethinking something that is normally taken for granted.

Of course, the object of the title—modern people—is important. The reference to the generational circumstance in the word “modern” poses a new question—one that had not been foreseen during the early periods of traditional religions—to modern people. Can religion, which (possibly) fulfilled the role of providing salvation in the past, solve the problems unique to modern times? From this title, we see a two-pronged direction in which the question is asked: an invitation to rethink “modernity” as well as to rethink “religion.” The first issue focuses on the deep-seated problems that the modern generation is facing, i.e., a reflection on the need to ascertain the nature of those problems. What are the problems faced by modern people? Are these problems that require completely new solutions? The other issue is the need to examine the state of religion in modern times. How have the different traditional religions, which aimed to save humanity in the initial stages of their establishment, changed through the generations to become what they are today? Are these religious orders currently able to respond to the difficulties faced by the modern world?

If you read the book with these questions in mind, you will not be disappointed. This book is a documentation of the dialogue between Shizuka Sasaki and Katsuhiro Kohara, academic researchers who have practiced Buddhism and Christianity, respectively, as faiths. The book uses simple language to present a myriad of suggestions for the future and recommendations for the current situation. Here, it takes a multifaceted perspective, using a method of inquiry that simultaneously considers contradictory elements, such as Buddhism and Christianity, particular and general aspects, and past and future, and presents an analysis of the present situation and an understanding of history backed by broad and profound

knowledge.

Kohara himself clarifies three points that make this book different from similar compilations of dialogues on Buddhism and Christianity. First, “it tries to deepen the understanding of self and of others by taking into consideration the origins and historical diversity of Buddhism and Christianity while taking advantage of the benefits of cutting-edge scholarship” (p. 207). Second, “it takes into account current global issues—such as the effects of the Internet, the worsening of global warming and other environmental problems, the individualization of religion and the weakening of religious organizations due to the secularization of society, which are not touched on in previous dialogues, as common issues for both Buddhism and Christianity.” “Third is that rather than dwelling on Buddhism and Christianity as separate religions, nor asking what religion is based on generalities and abstractions, the book tries to provide hints for understanding the meaning of religion in human history and for grasping it from a total perspective through comparisons of Buddhism and Christianity” (p. 208).

The book begins with an introductory chapter by Sasaki, followed by six chapters of dialogue and a concluding chapter by Kohara. While it delves into a wide range of topics, the discussion flows smoothly from one topic to another. For example, the first half of Chapter 1 alone, which begins with the academic standpoints of the two interlocutors, presents a wide range of assertions: Buddhism is not a religion revealed by some supernatural agent but a religion founded on the truth discovered by Buddha; the teachings of Buddha in their original form do not exist in the modern world; pointing out similarities of insignificant details of the scientific and religious worldviews means nothing, but there is a need to inquire about their fundamental relationship; although the concept of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) is similar to the scientific worldview, the former includes morality whereas the latter does not; the virtue that Buddhism aims for is different from the virtues of daily life, wherein it aims for the complete extinction of the driving force of the cycle of life and death (*nirvana*); the true follower of Buddhism does not aim for the improvement of the everyday world but for the formation of the monastic world (*Sangha*); the most important teachings of Buddhism for modern people are “impermanence of all things” and “absence of self;” and, although “all suffering” (*dukkha*) originally teaches that “there is no savior,” Mahayana Buddhism supposes the existence of transcendent saviors like Amida Buddha and the realization of an internal subsistence like the Buddha-nature. All of these topics are discussed within a mere 15 pages of the first half of Chapter 1. Therefore, it is not possible to cover everything the book touches on in this review; in fact, the beauty of the dialogue would be lost if I attempted to summarize

everything here. Accordingly, I will simply choose a single topic that piqued my interest from each chapter and briefly introduce these issues here.

In Chapter 1, what Sasaki called the “heart religion” I think aptly describes the current state of religion in modern society. The religious worldview, which has been driven out by the scientific worldview, has been abandoned as a representation of the real world, persisting only as an affair confined to the human heart and relegated as something that provides temporary comfort, identified using keywords like “heart,” “life,” and “living.” Although the “heart religion” appears to be comprehensive, these keywords are in fact meaningless. Therefore, anybody can attach any meaning they want to them, without having to go a single step out of their private world, making this type of religion powerless to build up a community. Hearing this argument brought to my mind the problem surrounding the inclusion of “moral education” in the elementary and junior high school curriculum (although not discussed in the book). Prior to the implementation of this program, there was a controversy over the need for the “cultivation of general religious sensibility,” which refers to fostering “reverence for life,” “appreciation for nature,” and, further, “attitude of love for country and birthplace,” without the use of specific religious concepts and symbols such as “God” or “Buddha” (since their use in public schools is prohibited). I think this “cultivation of general religious sensibility” is nothing other than the “heart religion.” It is not that I deny the importance of moral education. However, the “cultivation of general religious sensibility” does not touch on the fundamental evils that are rooted in humanity, which religion refers to as “worldly passions” or “sin” and regards as problematic. Moreover, it does not confront the danger of these evils becoming embedded into the structures of social systems. In other words, as mentioned by Sasaki in quoting Yuval Noah Harari in the Introduction, morality cannot be cultivated without fostering the perspective of relativization of para-religions such as “capitalism,” “nationalism,” and “humanism,” and by merely advocating for “nurturing respect for life and living in harmony with one another.”

Chapter 2 talks about fundamentalism as a reaction, so to speak, against the “heart religion.” If “heart religion” is religion that has struggled to remain alive in the human heart in submission to the scientific worldview, fundamentalism has rejected the scientific worldview by holding fast to the reality of the religious worldview. The chapter begins with the origin of fundamentalism in America and discusses many topics surrounding fundamentalism. To mention one particular topic, Sasaki views fundamentalism as something that manifests itself in two types: “historical fundamentalism” and “legitimate fundamentalism.” Historical fundamentalism regards religious writings and traditions

embraced by religion as absolute, such as the “supremacy of the sutras” in Buddhism and the “verbal inspiration of scripture” in Christianity, rejecting everything else that deviates from them, even to the point of becoming violent in extreme cases. On the other hand, legitimate fundamentalism does away with impurities and extraneous elements that have accumulated throughout history and tries to go back to the original essence of that religion. Sasaki, who aims to reestablish the original teachings of Buddha and their practice through academic research, self-professes to be a “fundamentalist” in the latter sense of the word. According to Kohara, the Protestant Reformers, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. were also fundamentalists in the latter sense of the word. With that said, however, I think in reality the line of demarcation between “historical fundamentalism” and “legitimate fundamentalism” is a thin one. One can easily transform into the other, the dangers of which I wish the authors had also elucidated.

The most interesting discussion for me was that about “Internet karma” in Chapter 3. The word “karma” refers to “deeds” in terms of “action,” “speech,” and “thought” that surely bring about inevitable consequences. In other words, either good or bad results arise depending on whether a deed is good or evil. This exactly corresponds to the saying that “as a man sows, so shall he reap.” Sasaki points out the following characteristics of “karma”:

1. All of the good and bad activities of people are recorded.
2. Although there is surely a consequence for every activity, the interval between the activity and its consequence is unclear.
3. There is no obvious resemblance between the cause (activity) and the result (inevitable consequence).

And the exact same structure can also be seen within the Internet today:

1. All of our activities are recorded as big data.
2. Flaming (stirring up strong online criticism) is a sure result of such activities.
3. Unexpected results may occur, such as one member of a family getting caught up in the scandalous affairs of some other member of the family.

Getting entangled in this system of Internet karma, modern people are being controlled by the “thirst, craving and desire” for approval expressed in the number of “Likes” and are unable to break free from their attachment to this system. Moreover, worldly passions, which

have thus far been naturally restrained in human relationships conducted mainly through face-to-face interaction, have been unleashed by the anonymity of the Internet. The Internet is a far more severe system of karma than that in the time of Buddha.

Since Buddha had found a way to break away, i.e., to become emancipated from the karma system, the teachings of Buddha are also effective against Internet karma. In particular, devoting oneself to the “impermanence of all things” and the “absence of self” is the way to extinguish this “thirst, craving and desire,” the driving force of the karma system (through the so-called “Noble Eightfold Path,” which is not mentioned in the book). In the past, practitioners of Buddhism who strived to emancipate themselves renounced the world completely and formed monastic communities (Sangha). Sasaki recommends various levels and degrees of “renunciation” to break away from Internet karma. Kohara, on the other hand, points out that the Sabbath was in fact a once-a-week renunciation of the world and suggests the creation of a “renunciation app” for modern times. Kohara has come up with this interesting and unique idea of a “renunciation app” where the Internet would be embedded with a function that could forcefully and periodically cut off all seamless connections to the Internet.

Hearing these arguments, I felt as if they had taken the words out of my mouth, because in the past I have proudly claimed that I have achieved the “State of Gelassenheit in the Internet world.” I learned the term “Gelassenheit” from Heidegger, a term that he actually borrowed from Meister Eckhart and when translated using Buddhist terminology means “releasement.” It points to the tranquil state of being “withdrawn yet involved and involved yet withdrawn”—a serene state of mind of being “neither too close nor too distant” from your surrounding entities, i.e., your daily life. To borrow the words of the Apostle Paul: “Those who deal with the world must do so as though they had no dealings with it. For this world in its present form is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31). In the case of Eckhart, this refers to “self-renunciation,” which is based on the mystical experience of the “birth of the Son of God in the innermost soul,” and the “state of dealing with surrounding entities while being separated from those dealings” achieved through that mystical experience. My experience is not as profound as that described by Eckhart, however. Although I still do not own a smartphone, and I absolutely never use SNS, this is not because I have intentionally renounced the Internet world but only because I cannot catch up with the latest technologies, since I will happily become a member of the “young-old” demographic on my birthday this year. In other words, people like me, who are starting to become a bit doddering, have unintentionally reached the ideal state of being “neither too close nor too distant” from the Internet without any effort. This is not a state of mind that I eventually achieved as a result of getting caught up in Internet karma and after

struggling to break free from it, but rather the ignorant are emancipated as they are, without purposely aiming for a state of renunciation and composure and without engaging in ascetic practices. While I was having this delusion and feeling the exhilaration of leading the way despite being an old man who is behind the times, I recently found out that the term “Gelassenheit” has been revived in Germany. Apparently, the word is being used to refer to “relaxation,” or providing relief to people who are exhausted from competing in this cutthroat capitalist society (consequently, to complement the competition society). However, this is nothing but a mere example of the “heart religion” or “healing religion,” so I was only slightly offended. I somehow went off-topic here, but I agree with the two interlocutors that one of the important roles of religion in the modern world is to provide a completely different worldview and to offer a perspective that radically relativizes the sense of values upon which the Internet world is built.

Chapter 4 begins by talking about how the advances of modern literary criticism have stripped off the sanctity of the sacred books (particularly the sutras of Mahayana Buddhism) as well as the Bible. Since the modern period, Buddhism and Christianity have been subject to attacks by the rapidly advancing fields of natural science and philology, and the changes that they have undergone separately as well as in relation to each other have been viewed and analyzed in terms of their social and cultural contexts. In this chapter, the authors point out that the values of general society tend to penetrate into religious orders, as shown by the adoption of common principles of organizational expansion and the incorporation of hierarchical structures into religious systems. Perceiving that this is a warning that also applies to educational and research institutions that study religion, to which I belong, I was moved to reflection.

Chapter 5 compares Protestantism and Mahayana Buddhism, and particularly interesting for me was the comparison and contrast of the Protestant Reformation and Kamakura Buddhism. The authors pointed out that although both movements were aimed at curtailing the clergy’s complicated doctrines, intricate ceremonies, and bloated bureaucracies and thus at bringing religion closer to the public, the Reformation returned to the Bible as the starting point, while the Kamakura Buddhists created the “latest mode” of teachings that were increasingly different from the teachings of Buddha. Although they had the same goal, they took opposite approaches. Moreover, their having resulted in the birth of sects and denominations with analogous teachings, such as “sola fide” (justification by faith alone) and “salvation through the benevolence of Buddha,” somehow points to the universality of the human spirit, as shown by the analogy that can be drawn from these two movements, despite

having been affected by different social and cultural contexts and historical backgrounds. As his scholarly pursuit, Sasaki aims for a return to the practice of Buddha's original teachings. After reading Chapter 5, however, I had a vision akin to "eternal recurrence," i.e., even after the teachings of Buddha become reestablished in the modern world, some of those who follow those teachings may eventually lose hope thinking that "no matter how much they engage in ascetic practices, they may never attain enlightenment in the way that Gautama Buddha did." Or, members of the general public may start to argue that "Bodhisattvas who prioritize the salvation of others to the point of setting themselves aside are superior to ascetics who train as a way to seek their own enlightenment." In other words, Mahayana Buddhism would eventually emerge again, leading to a repetition of the events in the history of Buddhism.

Chapter 6 analyzes the current state of Buddhism and Christianity in the world (particularly in East Asia). I was drawn more, however, to the last part of the dialogue between the two interlocutors, where they shared the opinion that religion should be confined to a niche that is separate from worldly values. The major part of modern society operates based on values founded on the infinite cycle of desire, and religion has nothing in particular to offer to people who find happiness in this cycle. The authors assert that religion should only discretely wait and prepare a completely different way of life for those people who feel incompatible with this everyday cycle of desire. Inspired by this assertion, I came to the following conclusions. It is said that there was a time in the past when religion had offered the dominant value and norm system for all areas of society. For example, in Western Europe during the High Middle Ages, Roman Catholicism had exclusive control over prevailing worldviews and philosophies. Although that might be the case, the majority of people, including the clergy, might actually have lived their lives mainly in the pursuit of selfish desires, and a different set of values and norms had only silently existed in the recesses of the convents and monasteries. Also, although Kierkegaard in 19th century Denmark had challenged the public by crying out loudly that "not despairing is one form of despair," he shone through because he was literally a "single individual." If the entire nation had become influenced by Kierkegaard and agreed with his thinking, that would have been uncanny. Even in 21st century Japan, religion is shying away from becoming mainstream, and it is those who are at the fringes that are shining their light on the world. When you think about it, Jesus himself was doing his work at the fringes of the Roman Empire, and when he spoke of being the "light of the world," it seems he was talking about a very small light. However, if the entire world is covered in complete darkness, this small light can be seen as an amazingly bright light.

In this review, I have chosen one topic that piqued my interest from each chapter,

among the many topics mentioned in the dialogue, and freely gave my own thoughts (or delusions) that were inspired by those topics. My goal in doing this was to somehow showcase the profundity of the dialogue, and to let readers know that they can receive intellectual stimulation from every page of the book. It goes without saying, however, that you need to read the book to truly enjoy the beauty of the dialogue.

Finally, I would like to end this review by pointing out just one thing that I felt was lacking. In this modern society where the scientific worldview prevails, the authenticity of conventional religious tenets and symbols is continually being diminished. In regard to this situation, the book talks about how the images of “Amida Buddha” or “Pure Land,” in the case of Buddhism, are being treated today and the problems that are inherent in these treatments (the tendency of stressing the dichotomy between “heart religion” and fundamentalism mentioned above). Kohara, however, tended to be more on the listener side of the dialogue, leaving something to be desired during discussions on Christianity. For example, what is the current state pertaining to “incarnation,” “resurrection,” and other highly held tenets and symbols of Christianity? I do not mean to say, however, that these tenets and symbols should be altered to match the scientific worldview, because doing so would also make them a mere “heart religion.” My concern is how to enable modern people, who perceive this world based on a scientific worldview, to experience the impact that these tenets and symbols had originally generated. I have in fact hoped to hear the opinions of the authors about this matter. I hasten to add, however, that although I presented the good points of the book along with pointing out a few areas that I felt were somewhat lacking, the authors are very aware of these points, and they have already addressed them in their other writings.