

The Japanese Concept of God

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概要

「神」「宗教」といった言葉は、日本ではあまり定義のはっきりしないもので、特に、外国のそれと比べてかなりの違いがある。国際化、世界秩序と叫ばれる今日、異国間の信条・信念・思想・哲学の相互理解なしにその実現は不可能のように思われる。そこでまず、日本人自身の神観念について、他の宗教や思想と比較しながら研究してみた。その結果、日本人のそれは起源が古くかつ不明瞭で、西洋の一神論的それとは異なる多神論・汎神論的のものであり、又、政治的要素により影響された宗教の産物的なものであるところも見られるという結論に達した。

I. ANALYTICAL EXPOSITION

Confusion Today

Generally speaking, Japanese people today, especially the young, say that they do not have any concept of God or they do not believe in God or religion. However, when it comes to the wedding, they perform a wedding ceremony according to the ritual of Shinto (the Japanese indigenous religion). And when they die, a funeral is conducted according to the Buddhist procedure. Moreover, people do avail themselves of the power of prayer when they are in an extremely difficult situation, as the saying goes: "Reliance upon Kami [God] in times of difficulties!"

Apparently, this is a contradiction between what they confess and what they practice, and there seems to be confusion about what God is and what religion is. It would be necessary to clarify how they understand God and how they believe in God, if they do.

This paper is an examination of the Japanese concept of God by comparing it with those of other cultures.

The Origin of the Concept of God in Japan

In today's terminology, the Japanese equivalent of the English word God is Kami. However, Fujita (698-699) states that there are two meanings in the old usage of this word. One is Chi, which meant an invisible, supernatural power that pervades the universe, such as the power of thunder, production, or spirit. These forces were believed to move from object to object, and be infectious.

Another was Tama. Tama is attached to specific objects or beings but it has a rather "ambiguous personality" (Fujita 699. trans. the present author).

Thus, in primitive Japan, there was a strong belief in some supernatural power in beings in general. The primitive people had their own folk religion based on such belief, which could be termed animism.

Gradually, The term Kami came to be used to refer to any being that invokes a feeling of awe, be it animate or inanimate, human or nonhuman.

Fundamentally, the term is an honorific for noble, sacred spirits, which implies a sense of adoration for their virtues and authority. All beings have such spirits, so in a sense all beings can be called kami or be regarded as potential kami. (Ono 6)

Thus, generally speaking, the definition of this term is not quite clear-cut. And it was used in very ambiguous ways.

Transformation of the Folk

Religion into Shinto

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan through Korea, it was accepted because of the political and the cultural factors rather

than religious or theological reasons. It was widely accepted and studied by the aristocrats, and soon the inferiority of the indigenous folk religion became evident when compared to the highly systematized and developed Buddhist philosophy. In order to maintain the calm of the common folks, the government had to establish for that religion its own doctrine and system.

Soon, the indigenous religion was decided to be called shinto, which means the way of Kami; Buddhism was called Buppo, the way of Buddha; and another foreign-imported religion Confucianism was called Judo, the way of Confucius.

Moreover, just around this time, the Imperial court ordained that many myths be collected in order to establish the divine origin and unbroken line of the Imperial household. Myths were collected and compiled in two books: Kojiki and Nihonshoki. Personages who appear in these myths were deified and called Kami. One of them, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Oomikami, was considered the Supreme God. But it was supreme among the many gods and not the single, mighty absolute God. And a system of doctrines was soon to be established which supported the divinity and authority of the Imperial family.

Attempts to exalt the status of the folk religion and the Imperial edict to establish a system of thought which would back up their authority—these two factors worked in a combined force and soon made Shinto the state religion of that country.

Sun Goddess as the supreme God.

Fusion and Conflict with Buddhism

Soon conflicts between Shinto and Buddhism arose in terms of the concepts of their respective deities. Kukai, a Buddhist monk, first solved this problem by his new theory of incarnation (Bunce 6). He said that the eternal Buddha appears in different forms at various places for guidance of humanity and that the national deities of Shinto were incarnations of Buddhas and Bodhisatvas.

Buddha was identified by him with the Sun Goddess.

But later on, another theory was advanced by someone else, which reversed the relationships, that is, Buddhas and Bodhisatvas were regarded as incarnations of the Shinto deities. Yet, another theory was that anyone could become a buddha after they die and enter the next life, and then after a certain period of time, they would become kami. Before long, among the common folks, Buddhist deities and Shinto deities came to be regarded as basically the same. The concept of God was really confused by then.

Christianity Introduced

In the mid-16th century, Christianity was introduced to Japan by a Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier and was spread rapidly in the south. But later, along with all other foreign elements of the Western culture, it was banned until the late 18th century. So the Christian doctrine of God or the Catholic notion of trinity were not accepted or spread wide enough.

Meiji Period

After two hundred years of isolation, Japan opened its door to the outside and started adopting many Western elements to catch up, however, the nationalistic attitude was also strengthened and soon Shinto, which was rather insignificant existence during the Middle Age through the premodern times, was given much power to support national unity and patriotism through Imperial authority. The Emperor, who had long been a mere figurehead and veiled behind the power of feudalistic warrior society, was given much authority in national affairs. Shinto was decalred the State religion and its doctrines were emphasized in madatory education. Worship of the emperor and worship of the Sun Goddess were taught throughout Japan, and to die for the emperor and for the nation was considered a great honor. This highly patriotic and nationalistic attitude kept increasing over the next several

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decades until the nation was completely defeated at the last War.

Today

The defeat in the WW II did away with basically all nationalistic, militaristic and imperialistic elements from the Japanese society. And the people lost their object of worship, loyalty and service. The divinity of the emperor was denied and taken back officially. The pre-war value system was completely changed and restructured; constitutional democracy was established, equality of men and women promoted, and the system of state religion was abolished. The old values including the religious values were lost and would not be taught in school as done before. New generations were brought up and educated in completely different manners; the main features were secularization and democratization. Only the forms of the old systems and tradition were left.

II. CRITICAL EXPOSITION

General Concepts

Kitagawa (see the REFERENCES) states that there are three conditions for fundamental definition of God: 1) Supernatural, independent, and personal. 2) Though definitely distinct from human beings, it is humana-like in that it is capable of understanding human hearts and minds 3) It possesses a powerful force and a free will. Then he gives seven categories of God:

- 1) Clan or Tribal God: Center of tribal or clan unity: Jehovah of Judaism.
- 2) Functional God: In charge of various functions of society and life.
- 3) Nature God: Born out of deification of earth, mountains, sea, wind, celestial bodies, plants and animals: Bear worship of ainu. Cows are regarded holy in India.
- 4) Abstract God: Deification of abstract values such as victory, freedom, and

order: seen in Greek and Roman religions.

- 5) Supreme God: Unifies and coordinates relationships among gods and rules over them: Greek Zeus, Roman Jupiter, or Persian Mitra.
- 6) One Single God: Transcendent and rules over all things in the univers. No other gods are admitted. Jehovah of Judaism, God of Christianity, Islamic Allah. [The translation of the terms was done by the present author.]

Hinduism

Whatever the original teaching was, Hinduism today is polytheistic and the doctrines are highly complex (Smart 330-333). There are three supreme Gods: Brahman (Creator God), Vishnu (God of preservaton) and Siva (God of destruct-ion). Vishnu has ten incarnations or avatars. And there are many other schools which have different interpretations and views of the gods. It is extremely complicated to describe in a short space. It is not clearly known how old Hinduism is, but at least it is as ancient as Japanese Shinto is. And there is a paralell between these two religions: both are ancient and worship thousands of gods and deities. One might well conclude that a long history and a lack of scientific knowledge in primitive times would result in polytheistic views.

The Ancient Greek Concept

The ancient Greeks believed in polytheism and worshipped many gods (Brandon 312). These gods were personifications of ideals, values or objects. They were described in Greek mythology just like human beings except that they were immortal. They incarnated ideal human beings. Again, the Greek religion is quite ancient and polytheistic just like Shinto and Hinduism; another parallel here.

Later great Greek philosophers started to incline towards a monotheistic belief. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were among them. For example, Aristotle reasoned that since everything and every movement must

have a cause that moves it, eventually one must reach the immovable Mover and the Causer of causes (426-432). He believed that that was God. His God was rational one, single being, or truth itself (634-640). His God was abstract. This is quite distinct from the Japanese concept; the latter had very little reasoning or rationale behind its belief. The primitive Japanese believed in gods according to their ambiguous feelings. The myths created many human deities according to the stories. Buddhists and Shintoists tried to reconcile their conflicts by quite arbitrary reasoning (such as reversing the theories whether Buddhas are the incarnations of Shinto deities or the reverse). But Aristotle's God was based upon profound logic, rationality and reason.

In his On the Soul, Aristotle also talks about the soul as a life force not only within the humans but also within the vegetable and the animal as well within human. The vegetable soul is a force of growth, and the animal soul is that of senses.

Buddhism

Outside the Buddhist world, it is often said that Buddha never taught about God and that he never mentioned the word God let alone God's existence. Yet the fact is, although the term God may not have been used, there are some Buddhist references to a being similar to God. According to Iwamoto (332-333) as well as Soka Gakkai Kyogakubu (612) there are three types of Buddha: 1) the Buddha with no beginning or end; it is truth itself, and universally pervasive. In a sense, this Buddha is manifested in the universe itself. The notion that this Buddha is Truth itself is similar to that of Aristotle. Also, the notion that this Buddha is manifested in the universe is a pantheistic view. 2) The second type is the Buddha with a beginning but no end; that is, this Buddha has a beginning when it becomes Buddha after being a Bodhisatva but then after that it remains Buddha eternally. 3) Another type is the Buddha with beginning and end;

there is a beginning because there was a time when this Buddha was a Bodhisativa (one who is training to be Buddha) and there is an end when it dies.

The first type of Buddha is clearly a God according to Kitagawa's definition. Although this teaching should have been known to the Japanese, the belief of the Cosmic Buddha, Supreme God was not prevalent among them, except for the belief in the Sun Goddess.

The Judio-Christian View

The Jewish and Christian belief of God is strong monotheism. Moreover, it is a personal God with whom one is able to talk. For example, it is written in the Old Testament: "Hear, O Isreal: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Deut. 6:4) "For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy." (Lev. 11:44)

Christ says, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth." (John 2:24)

Also God is known through His attributes: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen being understood by the things that were made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse..." (Rom. 1:20)

Jews and Christians believe in one, single and supreme God; there is no other god. Those who speak for God are prophets and those who are near to God are called saints, holy men and women.

Such a strong monotheistic view is very different from the Japanese concept. The Japanese view is basically ambiguous, polytheistic, and even mixed with other religious concepts.

Islam

Islam also teaches a strong belief in monotheism. "Your God is one God; there is no god but He Ever Gracious, Most Merciful." (The Qur'an 2:164) "Proclaim: He is Allah, the Single; Allah, the self-Existing and Besought of all. He begets not, nor is He begotten; and there is none equal to Him

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in His attributes." (Qur'an 112:2-5)

Also, they teach that God cannot be seen but can be known only through attributes: "...there is no god but He, the Creator of all things...He is Guardian over everything. Eyes cannot reach Him, but He manifests Himself before the eyes. He is the Imperceptible, the All-Aware." (Qur'an 6:102 -104)

Just like the Jewish and Christian view, the Islamic concept is absolutely monotheistic and quite different from the Japanese concept.

The Baha'i View

The Baha'i religion, which is the most recent world religion, also teaches a strong monotheistic view of God:

He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal, eternal in the past, eternal in the future detached from all things, ever-abiding, unchangeable, and self-subsisting. He has assigned no associate unto Him in His Kingdom, no counselor to counsel Him, none to compare unto Him, none to rival His glory. (Baha'u'llah 192)

He, in truth, hath, throughout eternity, been one in His essence, one in His attributes, one in His works. Any and every comparison is applicable only to His creatures, and all conceptions of association are conceptions that belong solely to those that serve Him.

(Baha'u'llah 193)

Also, the God which Baha'u'llah, the founder of this religion, talks about is unknowable in essence:

To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery.

(Baha'u'llah 46-47)

The reason for God's unknowability according to the Baha'i view is that the created cannot comprehend its creator, the part is not greater than the whole.

Thus, anything the created imagines about the creator must be on the same level or the lower than that of the created. Therefore, such an imagination is an erroneous view of God.

This people, all of them, have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image which they have made for themselves. And yet that image is comprehended, the human mind being the comprehender thereof, and certainly the comprehender is greater than that which lieth within its grasp; for imagination is but the branch, while mind is the root; and certainly the root is greater than the branch. (Abdu'l-Baha 53)

And the way to know the will and guidance of God, according to Baha'u'llah, is to know the teachings of God's manifestation (or messenger or prophet):

And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. (Baha'u'llah 66)

Thus, according to the Baha'i concept, we can conceive three distinct stations of existence: God, His manifestation and the created (humans, animals, etc).

Moreover, nature is a reflection of the attributes of God (Baha'u'llah 61-63; 177-178; 187-189); and the expression of the will of God itself (Baha'u'llah 142). And Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, talks about five aspects of spirit (143-144). He says that the mineral, vegetable, animal and

human all have each spirit; but it is different from what we usually think of spirit. The power of mineral is the cohesive power which holds all the atoms and elements together, making its existence possible. This power is invisible and thus a form of spiritual power. The power of vegetable is that of growth. This is also an invisible power. The animal has the power of sense. Then humans have the power of intellect which discovers material truth and another power which discovers spiritual truth; the former is called the human spirit and the latter the spirit of faith. Thus there are at least five categories of spirit. When we usually refer to spirit, we mean either the human spirit or the spirit of faith, those that pertain to humans only. The notion that the non-human beings also possess spirit may seem animistic, however, the Baha'i view is not animistic in a strict sense because the nature of the "spirit" of humans is clearly different from that of the non-humans. This is a very interesting point when we compare the Baha'i view to those of the primitive people; the latter believed that inanimate objects also possessed spirit (that is, they were animistic). This is in a sense true according to the Baha'i concept, because beings besides humans possess either mineral, vegetable or animal spirit. And nature is a reflection of the attributes of God (and God is a spirit according to the Baha'i, Christian or Islamic views). Therefore, the creation besides humans possess some sort of spiritual force and reflect supernatural powers that are of God. Thus, for the primitives who lacked in the kind of scientific knowledge we enjoy today, maybe it was rather natural that they had animistic views of the world. They might have been spiritually more susceptible to these aspects of life. For humanity today is rather immersed in the ocean of materialism, a situation in which one can more easily ignore or forget the spiritual aspects of life, if they really do exist. We can also see a

parallel in views between that of Aristotle, who regarded life forces of vegetables and animals as aspects of soul.

III. INTEGRATIVE CONCLUSION

Summary

Today, Japanese have quite ambiguous, confusing and mixed ideas about God. In this paper, it was made clear that the primitive Japanese concept of God or gods was quite similar to that of Hinduism or the Greek religion. It was polytheistic and the ideas about God were even more ambiguous. Nothing is clear about the origin of the Japanese primitive folk religion. Probably any religion or philosophy this old is inevitable to have developed highly complex, confusing, and ambiguous ideas and concepts.

Buddhism also has had a great impact upon the Japanese thought. However, by the time it reached the country, its paradigm had undergone much change and not all of the original teachings were properly transmitted. As it was absorbed by the Japanese thought, its teachings were interpreted or even distorted to suit the needs of the people or to reconcile the differences from Shinto.

Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i religion all teach monotheism. The latter three are relatively new comparing to other religions (the Baha'i religion being only some 150 years old). The newer the religion is, it has a stronger tendency to teach monotheism and the teachings are more scientific and highly logical.

The Supreme God of Shinto, the Sun Goddess, is not the one, single God in a strict sense, because this God also serves other gods and is regarded as supreme among the many gods.

Buddhism could be regarded as monotheistic if we regard the notion of the Cosmic Buddha, the Buddha with no beginning and end, as a reference to the one,

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single God as taught in Judaism or Christianity.

Evolution of Human Understanding and Challenges Today

The recent rapid and remarkable scientific development has changed the surface of the earth as well as the minds and hearts of modern people. In parallel to this, traditional religious values and doctrines fell away and declined. Many people are skeptical of anything that is not visible, tangible or verifiable through experimentation. Japanese are no exceptions, particularly the younger generations. The already ambiguous traditional concept of God is lost and the people's minds are even more confused and perplexed about the existence of God and the meaning of religion. Consequently they have no clear idea about the purpose of life, true nature of human beings, and how they should live their lives. The strong materialistic tendency and the relative lack of religious values are greatly affecting individual as well social lives of the people. Further religious studies could place their focus on this fundamental issue: concepts of God and religion and of the purpose of religion. All other religious issues seem to be derived from these fundamental issues.

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