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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
AND RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE:
MONOTHEISM AND POLYTHEISM AS METHODOLOGIES¹

A JAPANESE CATHOLIC NOVELIST

The Catholic Christian Endō Shūsaku was recognized as one of the finest novelists of twentieth century Japan. It is said that he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature, but he died in 1996 without receiving it. At his funeral, in addition to his glasses and fountain pen, two of his works were placed in his coffin: *Silence (Chinmoku)* and *Deep River (Fukai kawa)*. This choice seems understandable. *Silence* was published in 1966, and it was thirty years later that *Deep River* appeared. In the interval, Endō's exploration of the central theme of his works – the question of the nature of the Japanese reception of Christianity – gradually deepened.

Endō's progress during this period, however, may be viewed as echoing the flow of the four centuries from the Christian literature of the sixteenth century to contemporary novels. This is because the character of Endō's oeuvre sets forth in compressed form the historical flow of modern Japan as it adopted elements of Western civilization.

Silence opens with the plans of two young Portuguese to enter sixteenth century Japan, then under the ban on Christianity, surreptitiously. This was about the time of the suppression of the uprising in Shimabara. After great pains, the pair manage to land undetected by the authorities and to contact Japanese Christian believers. Before long, however, they are apprehended, and after brutal torture, are driven to renounce their faith. Roderigo, one of the central characters, is called upon to trample sacred pictures. The authorities believe that if the priest recants, the believers will follow. He vacillates between giving in and resisting, and the words, «God, why are you silent?»,

¹ Trans. Dennis Hirota.

swirl like a black whirlpool in his mind. It is the scream of a curse against a God who will not extend a saving hand.

At this point, an older priest, Ferreira, who has recanted twenty years earlier, appears before him and states: «The one who stands before you is an old priest who was defeated in propagation. All I know is that your religion, and mine, will not take root in this country. This land is a swamp. Plant a sprout here, and it will begin to rot». Though Roderigo raises his voice in anger, Ferreira, who has taken the Japanese name Sawano Chūan, continues calmly. «In the Japanese mind, the God of Christianity loses its reality even before we notice. The Japanese do not possess the ability to contemplate a God who completely transcends humanity. By God they mean an existence that is the same as humanity. This is not the God of the Church».

I believe that the sentiments expressed by Ferreira reflect those of Endō himself. Further, the fundamental nature of Japanese religiosity set forth here is not only that of the "Christian century," but remains unchanged among the Japanese even today. The time approaches for Roderigo to trample the sacred picture. A black eddy unfurls, and the anguished face of Christ with a crown of thorns appears. Ferreira lends support, urging him to have courage. If the priest tramples the picture, the believers will also be saved. As Roderigo raises his foot, the head turns to face and speak to him: «You do well to trample the picture. I was born in this world to be trampled by you. It was to share your pain that I bore the cross».

Christ finally broke the silence. The Christ who shares human pain and suffering came back to life and consented to the trampling. From behind this Christ, the strict and angry figure of God had already disappeared. There floated up instead the visage of a God of maternal forgiveness, with a gaze of love and compassion. More than God's mercy, one might say there is even an illusion of Buddha's compassion. It even appears that Roderigo seeks, imposed over an image of God who transcends humanity, a human countenance of motherly love. Roderigo's metamorphosis may be seen to mirror the mind of the novelist Endō himself, who was raised in the religious environment of marsh-like Japan.

Then, thirty years later, *Deep River* was published. The central character is a drifter who works carrying the corpses of those who have died in the streets near the banks of the Ganges River to the pyres for cremation. He had studied Christian theology as a monk, but unable to believe in the Western God, had been shunned by priests. Thus, while seeking God, his wanderings took him finally to India. The former monk murmurs: «There are various religions in the world, but do they not all ultimately reach the same destination? God does not exist only in the world of Western Christianity. He lives also in the Hinduism and Buddhism of Asia».

Those who recanted their faith in *Silence* spoke of the gentle figure of the God who alighted in the marsh-like environment. By comparison, the God who appears in *Deep River* enters more deeply into the marsh and broadly casts new shadows of divinity. In the thirty years between these two works, what sort of transfiguration of God is projected? It may be that the Christian Endō closely approached the world of what might be called a native religion of Japan, in precisely the way that Japanese Christians came to be acculturated as “hidden Christians” in the marsh environment.

How is it that a leading Japanese novelist came to write such works as *Silence* and *Deep River*? In order to probe the religious background, I will take up here the themes of interreligious dialogue and coexistence, and also the perspectives from monotheistic and polytheistic stances.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

There have been two periods in Japanese history when interreligious dialogue has held great significance. The first period was the “Christian era” during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The second was the Meiji period, with the opening of the nation to Western influence. Both periods involved the active efforts of Christians seeking contact with Japan from without. We must note here that in neither case did Japanese religions attempt to reach outward and establish a relationship of dialogue with other religious traditions. Rather, Christianity, as a foreign religion, entered Japan together with other elements of Western civilization and sought to engage native religious traditions. In other words, it has been Christianity that has actively sought dialogue and not the side of Japanese religious traditions.

It may be possible to characterize the situation in terms of a transmitter religion and a receiver religion, with the expectations of religious dialogue chiefly held by the former. In other words, religious dialogue was the form of communication determined by the more aggressive Christian side. Leaving aside the Christian era in Japan of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I would like to consider here the significance of the religious dialogue that arose during the Meiji period. I believe that this period holds important hints regarding the character and direction of interreligious dialogue in the present also. I will focus on one particular issue out of a range of possible topics.

One almost symbolic element of the Meiji period was the lifting of the lengthy prohibition on Christianity. The ban in place from the Edo period on was removed in 1873 (Meiji 6). Japanese Christians who had practiced their religion in secret emerged publicly and Christian missionaries from abroad began arriving.

The era of “civilization and enlightenment” had commenced. During the second decade of the Meiji period, strong currents of Westernization

emerged, accompanied in the world of thought by a skepticism regarding traditional philosophies. The same movements were manifest in religious spheres. It was a time when Buddhism began to feel the pressure of Christian thought. The Christianity that up to then had been held in a position of inferiority showed signs of great vigor, and the Buddhism that had rested at ease on its authority had to take a defensive posture.

In response to the Christian offensive, Buddhists attempted a variety of responses. Both the Buddhist temple institutions and the Buddhist scholarly community quickly awakened to the gravity of the situation. We must take special note here that, from very early on, Buddhists realized that in comparison with Western thought, Buddhist thought was in no way inferior. Thus, the Buddhist self-defense made preparations for an ideological struggle.

It is possible to mention, as an example of such reaction, the activities of such representative Buddhist scholars of the period as Inoue Enryō and Murakami Senshō. Their accomplishments are diverse, but one aspect of their work that they held in common was the attempt to reinterpret Buddhist thought in terms of Western philosophy. In response to criticism from Christians, they sought to reconstruct Buddhist ideas in terms of Western concepts and frameworks. Their efforts were clearly reactions to ideological attacks from Christians, but they represented attempts by Buddhists to breathe in the new atmosphere of the period.

The attempts at a new formulation of Buddhism employing Western philosophy did not stop at mere reinterpretation, but also ventured into criticism of Christianity. We see here the effort not only to don the armor of Western philosophy, but further to turn Western thought against the very Christianity that lay at its roots. Various tacks manifested themselves in the Buddhist criticisms of Christianity. For example, it was asserted that the monotheistic Christianity was at odds with the status of the emperor, implying that the foreign religion could not be appropriate for the native spiritual ethos. There was even the charge that Christian notions of equality and philanthropy were related to republicanism and clashed with the Japanese morality of the family and society.

The most interesting criticism, however, is that the ideas of divine creation and of the God of Providence taught in the Bible are at odds with fundamental principles of science and philosophy. Buddhists attacked the basic Christian world view in the name of science and philosophy, pointing out above all the contradictions with the theory of evolution. Japanese Buddhists quickly adopted the theory of evolution, which was just one framework of Western philosophy, and attempted thereby to shake the intellectual foundations of Christianity. Needless to say, such criticism had already appeared in Europe. Japanese intellectuals had quickly perceived this and sought to appropriate such criticisms.

Here we see the character of the stance Meiji Buddhism took toward the currents of Westernization in the period. In the adoption of the theory of evolution by Japanese Buddhist intellectuals, we see in fact the hurried traces of Westernization. This Westernization of Japanese Buddhists in the early Meiji period led to the assertion that the system of Buddhist teachings did not contradict the theory of evolution and was fundamentally rational in nature. The teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha and the Mahayana Buddhism that developed historically from it were not necessarily at odds with modern Western thought and science. Further, this is because originally Buddhism grasped things in terms of the relationship of cause and effect and possessed a highly rational spirit.

This line of thought was condensed into the attempts at reinterpretation of Buddhism conducted by Inoue Enryō and Murakami Senshō. These may be called efforts to deploy concepts and terms of Western philosophy as armor for Buddhism in a kind of eclecticism or compromise of East and West. It was an attempt to drive a wedge into the Christian world view based on modes of thought adopted from Western philosophy itself. It is impossible to deny that this movement of Buddhist criticism of Christianity, on a superficial level, gave rise to a certain animosity between Buddhism and Christianity. From a Christian perspective, Japanese Buddhists were using as a projectile weapon the theory of evolution, which Christians found difficult to acknowledge. It is as though they were attacking a weakness harbored in the lion's body, to borrow a Buddhist metaphor. We should not fail to notice, however, that Christians here failed to take up the opportunity to engage Buddhists in debate in the same arena.

Nevertheless, Buddhists showed eagerness to reinterpret themselves within the frameworks of Western philosophy. Thus, Meiji period Christianity did not confront traditional Buddhism as it was, but rather a "modern Buddhism" flavored with Western philosophy. It was not Buddhism in the context of the popular religion nurtured in the Japanese environment. In other words, Christians encountered an intellectualized and conceptualized Buddhism decked out in Western colors. Conditions matured for dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. It may be said that dialogue or debate became possible with a "rationalized Buddhism" reconstructed by a number of intellectuals. Traditional Buddhism receded into the background, and instead a modern Buddhism appeared in new clothing and began to run on the track of religious dialogue laid by the West. This dialogue was partly characterized by ideological opposition between Buddhism and Christianity. It exhibited the aspect of Buddhist-Christian debate touched off by the Westernization of the Meiji period. This kind of debate, we must note, was one of the fundamental forms of religious dialogue in modern Japan.

The most highly developed form of such religious dialogue is seen, for example, in the philosophy (or religious philosophy) of Nishida Kitarō. It was the modern philosopher Nishida above all who sought to systematize and formulate logically, based on Western philosophical concepts and modes of thought, the fundamental thought of Buddhism. He labored to express Zen experience and the world of faith in Amida Buddha in terms of Western thought and conceptual language. I do not mean to ignore the fact that Nishida's basic aim was to appropriate Western philosophy critically and to employ it to highlight the unique characteristics of Buddhist thought in the East. Thus, Nishida philosophy developed around such themes as "nothingness" and "topos" that differ from the traditions of Western philosophy. Nevertheless, when he sought to clarify the "logic of nothingness" or the "philosophy of topos," his attempt depended on the intellectual traditions of Western philosophy. He may be said to have adapted and transformed the concepts and methods of Western philosophy in his own manner. That is, Western philosophy also sought to reinterpret the world of traditional Buddhism according to its own terms. While making free use of the logic and conceptual structures comprehensible in Western philosophy, he attempted to simulate a non-Western world of Buddhist philosophy. In this sense, Nishida's project may be seen to resemble the rearming of Buddhist thought through Western philosophy initially undertaken by Inoue and Murakami in the early Meiji period.

Thus, Nishida philosophy gave clear form to the method of debate taken up by religious dialogue between West and East. In this sense, religious dialogue in modern Japan begins with the appearance of Nishida philosophy, and to this day the stream of religious dialogue follows the lines it lays out.

The following two characteristics may be seen through abstracting out the details of Nishida philosophy. First, it represents the making of Buddhism into a form of monotheism. This tendency is clearly seen, for example, in Nishida's discussions of Pure Land Buddhism and faith in Amida Buddha. The same may be said of the discussion of Shinran by Nishida's colleague Tanabe Hajime. The second characteristic of Nishida's religious philosophy is the tendency to treat Buddhist experience through abstraction and universalization. Nishida's notion of "pure experience" was arrived at through such sophisticated discussion. Zen experience, in particular, is apprehended in this way. Nishida did not merely grasp the language of Zen Buddhism by carrying it to a higher level of abstraction. He sought further to universalize the experience of Zen as a whole.

These two characteristics of Nishida's philosophy – the monotheistic interpretation of Buddhism and the abstraction and universalization of the world of Buddhist experience – are also the salient characteristics of the methods of religious dialogue in modern Japan. They constituted the original

pattern, on the side of Buddhism, that the frequently conducted religious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity took. This pattern imparts to Buddhist tradition a modernist coloration, and may be said to have given rise to an intellectualized, elitist Buddhism popular only among academics and intellectuals. It was in this way that an intellectual arena for interreligious dialogue was established—an arena that could be shared by an aggressive transmitter, Christianity, and a passive receiver, Buddhism.

THE WORLD OF RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE

It may sound paradoxical, but as we have seen above, religious dialogue has possessed from the outset the quality of religious debate. With modern thought as referee, it has been a contest of logic over the superiority of world view, a kind of Olympics of speculation. Since terms and methods of European origin have been assumed on both sides, the basis of dialogue has been seen as mutual understanding and mutual cooperation, but it has also developed at times with sharp exchanges. On the one hand, commonalities and differences have been searched out and special characteristics and universal aspects have been charted in academic manner. On the other hand, the assertion of one's own superiority has never been relinquished.

In short, interreligious dialogue did not necessarily become free of the framework of debate that pursued the opposition of religion and religion in terms of philosophical meaning. Behind the attractive term "dialogue" there always lay a thorn. For this reason, the participants not uncommonly took an aggressive posture.

I wish to note here that there was at the same time a world that might be called "religious coexistence". Instead of the aggressiveness that occurred in the debates of interreligious dialogue, there was an atmosphere of divided or shared living space among coexisting traditions. In this case, each religious tradition does not assert itself in particular. Such assertion is unnecessary. This is because the faiths that dwell in this world of religious coexistence have for the most part lived in a pluralistic attitude based on polytheistic principles and values. It is not, of course, that there has never been struggle among the gods of different polytheistic traditions. When we consider carefully, however, we find that conflict among the gods of polytheistic traditions has arisen chiefly when monotheistic values and principles of absoluteness have been introduced. Monotheistic self-assertion has frequently played the role of destroying the order of religious coexistence, and as a result, interreligious dialogue based on the superiority of one's monotheistic values has been imposed.

The character of religious dialogue in modern Japan set forth earlier follows the line I have just described. Christianity, with deepening monothe-

istic self-confidence and with an aggressive mode of communication, challenged Buddhists, who were anxious and defensive about the traces within it from the premodern past. In other words, monotheistic Christianity imposed on Buddhism, which harbored within itself polytheistic characteristics, a proselytizing in the name of dialogue. In response to the approach from this kind of Christianity, the Buddhist intellectual elite armed themselves with Western forms of logic and philosophical methods and, laboring as receivers, used as trumps notions of mystical experience and fundamental religiosity and engaged in harmonious dialogue with Christianity.

Nevertheless, in contrast to this aspect of religious dialogue in modern Japan, a broader landscape of religious coexistence was unfolding among popular forms of religion. Unlike the religious dialogue conducted by the intellectual elite in closed chambers closed to public view, the tradition of religious coexistence was carried on in vastly more open spaces and attracted numbers of people. Further, ironically, if it had not been for this tradition of religious coexistence, religious dialogue also would not have existed. Religious coexistence was established on a foundation that would stand firm even without religious dialogue. The character of religious dialogue was such, however, that without the womb of religious coexistence, it could not have been established.

I will give several concrete examples of what I means by religious coexistence. In the first part of October, 1991, I spent a few days in Barcelona. Preparations were in full swing for the Olympics the following year, and the city was somewhat dusty and unsettled in feeling. There were seventy or eighty Japanese companies operating in Barcelona. Approximately fifty kilometers west of Barcelona is the Monsera monastery. It was to visit this monastery that I was in the area. I had a letter of introduction to a priest there from James Heisig of Nanzan University.

I was amazed to find the monastery located on the side of a mountain at an elevation of over 1200 meters. I was reminded of the title of Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. Monasteries in the west are built on craggy mountains barren of trees or vegetation in order to carry on battle with the devil. This contrasts strongly with the temple monasteries in Japan such as Mount Hiei and Mount Kōya, which are enveloped in green. The Monsera monastery was built in the eleventh century, and is known for the statue of the Virgin Mary standing above the central altar. At her knees, Mary embraces the infant Jesus, and her countenance has become darkened over the ages. In order to approach the "black Mary" one climbs the stairs at the side of the sanctuary, and many pilgrims worship there, touching the statue with their hands and lips.

I stayed at the monastery only three days, but each day bus loads of pilgrims arrived from all over Europe. At mass on Sunday, the sanctuary was

packed to capacity. Perhaps a comparable thriving religious site in Japan is the Asakusa Kannon. One also thinks of a few other sites of popular religious devotion. At the center of the sanctuary is suspended an image of Christ on the cross. The daily services of the monks centered on this image of Christ. It is impossible for anyone to approach and touch this statue.

Thus, those who enter the sanctuary naturally gaze up to the image of Christ directly in front at the center of the altar, and further look up higher at the statue of Mary placed far at the top level of the altar. On seeing this arrangement, I was immediately reminded of the Great Buddha Hall at Tōdaiji temple in Nara. I thought specifically of the hall on April 8, when the observance of the birth of Sakyamuni Buddha is held. On this day, an image of the newly born Sakyamuni is placed before the Great Buddha in a shrine of flowers.

The contrast between the Great Buddha and the small image of the infant Sakyamuni is comparable to the contrast between the image of Christ on the cross and the statue of the Virgin Mary and child at Monsera. In all likelihood, there is no need for religious dialogue between the black Mary of Monsera monastery and the Great Buddha of Nara's Tōdaiji. No engagement in a dialogical tension arises between the infant Christ or Christ on the cross and the image of the newly born Sakyamuni. This is because we see here, in their natural form, the simultaneous existence of religious phenomena based in popular faith. There is no strain of religious dialogue, but rather the affinity of religious coexistence.

Just before my trip to Barcelona, I had a chance to visit China. It was my third visit to Beijing. I took the opportunity to climb Mount Tai, approximately eight hours by express train from Beijing. It is a Taoist sacred site, and one of the five sacred mountains of China. It is said that famous emperors performed rites to the deities of heaven and earth there, praying for peace for their subjects and for long life.

Mount Tai is a spirit mountain, having from ancient times been regarded as a sacred site where the spirits of the dead ascended. Superimposed upon it are images both of heaven and of the realm of the dead. In Japan, the expression «the King of Mount Tai» refers to the chief deity of the realm of death. This is of course the influence of Taoism. For example, in *Azuma Kagami*, a historical record of medieval Japan, there are numerous scenes in which the Hōjō regent performs worship of the ruler of Mount Tai in order to pacify the spirits of ancestors and the dead.

However, at the peak of Mount Tai the most elaborate worship was that of a female empress deity. Every day Taoist priests perform rituals, and the stream of pilgrims is unending. To reach the 1500 meter elevation, pilgrims climbed 7000 steps, but they followed each other in long unbroken lines. The goddess was the focus of widespread popular faith. When I went on to

Barcelona, the image of the goddess of Mount Tai formed a pair with the image of the black Mary of Monsera. The shared worship of goddess figures emerged from a background of different times and places. As another example of goddess worship, we might add the worship of Kannon in Japan.

Regarding such worship, is there any need for interreligious dialogue? In world history similar examples of goddess worship surely exist in countless numbers. Such faith in goddess figures has taken the road of religious coexistence and has not entered into any aggressive dialogue. The goddess faiths of the world, together with the traditions of polytheism, have formed a womb for religious coexistence.

MONOTHEISM AND POLYTHEISM AS METHODOLOGIES

I have taken up the theme of monotheism and polytheism as distinct methods of discourse, for it has seemed to me that, in comparison with a monotheistic methodology, polytheism deserves a new evaluation. It appears to me that monotheism as method or a monotheistic outlook serves as the principle upon which interreligious dialogue as it has been conducted thus far has been established. By contrast, a polytheistic method serves rather as a standard of values that elicits notions of religious coexistence.

In 1943, the Protestant theologian Richard Niebuhr published his widely read and highly influential *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. To summarize Niebuhr's central thesis, the basic characteristic of contemporary society is that it is no longer dominated by a central set of values, and instead, multiple systems of values and world views have developed with great diversity. To give an abstract example, the monotheistic God of theology has receded, giving way to numerous gods of society that have emerged in splendid array. According to Niebuhr, these gods include truth, justice, peace, love, good, country, democracy, civilization, church, art, and so on.

Niebuhr terms people's attitude toward these gods "social faith." At the same time, he warns that this sort of pluralistic social faith may gradually become a breeding ground giving rise to anarchical conditions in society. This is because these gods of society each require absolute allegiance and repudiate the demands of the other gods. Thus, he sketches what might be called a birth of tragedy occurring out of polytheism. Nevertheless, according to Niebuhr, from within these very conditions harboring the crisis of division and anarchy, monotheism emerges with new prominence. There appears on the stage of history a demand for "radical monotheism" as a transcendental call that saves us from this crisis. In short, at the superficial level of the spirit we are polytheists, but in our depths we are monotheists, according to Niebuhr. We may call this a skillful monotheistic apologetics. Goethe

once said that as an artist he was a polytheist, but that as a moralist, he was monotheistic. Niebuhr appropriated Goethe's experience for his own theological theory.

A contrasting perspective was articulated in David Miller's *The New Polytheism: Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses*, published in 1981. Miller was a Jungian religious scholar, and when his book was reprinted, a letter written by Henri Courbin was added as a preface and a detailed afterword was provided by another Jungian scholar, James Hillman. Miller begins his discussion with a recognition that the present is an age of pluralism. While in agreement with Niebuhr on this point, he goes on to attempt an explanation of the demise, not the salvation, of monotheism. According to Miller, contemporary social monotheism indicates fascism, imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, despotism, and so on. It is after the demise of such monotheisms that democracy as "social polytheism" will emerge as the new face symbolizing the present. Although somewhat schematic, he is persuasive in arguing that genuine spiritual freedom will be secured through the tension in facing anarchy and chaos squarely.

The absence of God asserted by Nietzsche and Heidegger appears to have given rise at present to a "philosophical polytheism" that emphasizes such characteristics as relativism, indeterminism, and irrationality. Moreover, we have now reached the point at which the basis cannot be established for the identity of the individual, which resembles the existence of the monotheistic God. Most people today experience themselves as a composite of many selves, and the notion of the fundamental will of an integral ego has become no more than a myth, if not an illusion. In other words, according to Miller, the deepest strata of human existence have in fact become polytheistic.

Miller goes on to say that, even if persons profess a monotheistic faith, their experiences in life are explained through invoking a polytheistic "theology." The universes of Greek religion or Egyptian religion, Hinduism or the American Indians, and the deities who populate them, no longer belong to an alien world of mythology. The gods and goddess who appear in those realms form a many-faceted system that vividly reflects our own community of men and women and provides other names for the pluralistic patterns in which our own existence is illuminated from its depths.

The allegory that informs monotheistic traditions is shaped by an image of all things revolving around a single center. By contrast, polytheistic traditions find support in the image of a globe in which the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere, as stated by Giordano Bruno. Jung rephrases this by saying that the self is a circle in which the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere. In actuality, the loss of center that characterizes our polytheistic crisis can be a truly frightening experience. Miller's final diagnosis is that this has become the deep sensibility of our age.

I have not taken up Niebuhr and Miller together here in order to discuss the relative merits of their arguments. Rather, I have sought to highlight the roles that might be played by these two constructs or modalities of thought informed respectively by monotheism and polytheism as methodologies and as instruments of intellectual clarification. From this perspective, we have seen that the mode of discourse termed "interreligious dialogue" has been rooted in a methodological monotheism. Given the fact that the kind of reflection termed interreligious dialogue is inherently prejudiced in this way, surely it is time to recognize its limitations and set for ourselves the next goal.