

Is Polytheism Really Tolerant?

Masanori Kurasawa

Translated by Kelly Malone

Japan Evangelical Association Theological Commission Pamphlet 6 (May 2006): 49-59.

SUMMARY

I examine the proposition, “Polytheism is tolerant, but monotheism is intolerant.” Is the polytheistic world really tolerant? By examining this present day issue from the history the ancient Greco-Roman Empire, India and Japan, we see that polytheism metamorphosized into simple monotheism and religious nationalism, resulting in exclusivist violence. Trinitarian theology (God as Trinity) prepares us for a complex social environment through a freedom in unity that avoids both the confusion that results from polytheism and the absolutism that results from homogeneous theology.

INTRODUCTION

From the “time of terror” on Sept. 11, 2001, in response to radical Islamic terrorism, a military invasion by an U.S.-centered multinational military force (including Japan Self-Defense Forces) has taken place in Afghanistan and Iraq. That is the present uncontrollable situation. The world media and Japanese intelligentsia, which have presented this as a structural confrontation between American Evangelical Christianity and Islamic Fundamentalism, have the presupposition that “monotheism is warlike,” and prescribe, “Polytheism is tolerant, but monotheism is intolerant.” They emphasize the polytheistic religious view and worldview, which emphasizes mutuality and cooperation, could contribute to world peace. This is unlike the monotheistic religious view and worldview that exclude other people in a fundamentalist manner. Is this really appropriate to say? By considering the actual reality of polytheism and the exclusivism of the polytheistic worldview, I want to test the proposition, “Polytheism is tolerant, but monotheism is intolerant.”

I. POLYTHEISM AND THE LIMITATIONS OF ITS TOLERANCE

Monotheism, as the belief in only one God, includes Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Polytheism, as the practice of worshiping many gods at the same time, includes Shinto, Hinduism, Buddhism and the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. Simply, there is a difference between the religious form of monotheism and polytheism, but differentiating between the content is rather difficult. Even in monotheism there is “monotheistic worship” which worships one specified god while recognizing many gods. Also there is “simple monotheism” which worships one god chosen from among many gods as the highest god. There is also “absolute monotheism” which does not recognize other divine beings. However, as for the special distinction of each one, monotheism

worships one personal, transcendent god, on the other hand “polytheism” says that each of the various works of nature and spirit are symbolized as gods.

I.A. The Polytheistic World and the Roman Empire

Certainly, polytheism tolerates and is receptive to the existence of many gods. In polytheism various religious views and values are recognized, and are thought of as moving towards their mutual existence. But does history teach this? An often cited example is the Roman Empire. After Rome conquered various peoples by military power and established its rule, it cleverly employed the existing structures. Rome respected each nation’s religion and values as much as possible and entrusted rule to their leaders. At the time of the birth of Christianity, while Palestine was under Roman rule, Judea was ruled by Herod (Matt. 2:1). Also, Rome tolerated the Jews’ religion and had a tendency to avoid interference in their religious life. However, if a rebellion against the Roman government occurred, every religion and value system was restricted, and polytheism was strengthened to destroy real tolerance and compromise.

Among the Jews, the Pharisees, who were a religious sect, maintained religious purity against other peoples’ gods and idols, and the zealots, who were political patriots, instigated continual political conflict with Rome. The resistance activity against Rome led to the Jewish war in which Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army and the temple was burned (A.D. 70). Only among those who showed loyalty to the Roman emperor did the empire have tolerance for religion and values. After this, Rome tested this loyalty through the development of emperor worship. Until the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313), for 300 years although Christians were good citizens, in a polytheistic nation their faith and beliefs were restricted and excluded. Conversely, when Christianity was authorized by Rome and became the empire’s only religion, in order to maintain political order, belief in other religions became the crime of “heresy.”

I.B. The Polytheistic Country of India

Taking India as a representative polytheistic country, in recent years confrontation and dispute among religions has intensified locally. Hinduism, which skillfully takes in internal pluralism and heterogeneous factors, includes the existence of many gods and is considered to be a tolerant religion, holds an adversarial opinion against Christianity and Islam in particular. The characteristic of maintaining the religious identity of ancient India by resisting pressure from political authority which accompanied foreign religions is strong. As a country that was once a Hindu civilization, India despised people who were imported by Islam, and later suppressed conversion to Christianity transplanted from England. After independence, India tried to be a secular polytheistic country with a multi-ethnic, multicultural society, but from the 1980’s, a sense of brotherhood based on Hindu nationalism which considered both Christianity and Islam enemies was emphasized. In the multi-ethnic, multicultural society of India, this Hindu nationalism moved in the opposite

direction towards a “homogeneous cultural” nation, bringing about huge friction and division in Indian society. Even in the polytheistic world, in relation to this identity, we can see a movement towards intolerance and exclusivism referred to as “religious nationalism”(Ogawa 2003: 153, 177).

I.C. The Politically Religious Country of Japan

Also in the case of Japan, there was a period which exhibited a condition which corresponded to the religion of the Roman Empire and the religion of Indian nationalism. Japan is a polytheistic country. Even Buddhism from the Chinese mainland went through the process of indigenization, passing through a Japanese transformation centered on the ancestral altar. Due to the influence of foreign religion, ancient Japanese animism (nature religion) was systematized as Shinto. Since the arrival of Buddhism, Japanese religion continuously has been under national control. On the one hand, those with authority were cautious about religion as something which misleads people’s hearts. On the other hand, religion was used by political leaders as a psychological control to have their own way in controlling human hearts. Following the Meiji Restoration, in order to oppose the colonization of Japan by Western Powers, the Meiji government took the policy of “national wealth and military strength,” and set in place the “Yamato Spirit” cultivated by the emperor to accomplish the construction of a modern nation. The national Shinto system was based on “Japanese Spirit and Western Learning.” Even in Japan, which was thought of as a polytheistic country, the politicization of religion from ancient times should be evaluated. In the course of time the many gods were systematized so that national rule by the emperor, who was considered to be the 10,000th successor of the highest god Amaterasu Omikami, produced “National Shinto.” Shinto, which has a background of polytheism, by means of exclusivist religious teaching, became a “socio-political religion” (Nishitani 2004: 206), and resulted in an exclusivist religious nationalism. Japan was a polytheistic country which accepted various religions and beliefs, but there were limitations. Namely, on the one hand, National Shinto was established as the ultimate “orthodoxy,” and became the measure to evaluate public social consistency. On the other hand, religions such as Shrine Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity were positioned as “heterodoxy,” entirely in private domain to provide “peace in the heart.” The latter always was systematized by the nation, and became a means to serve the nation. Because of this, National Shinto (Emperor Worship) was not considered a “religion,” but rather became a public social duty which showed the people’s loyalty. The polytheistic religious view was tolerated within this framework. Is polytheism really tolerant?

As the above examples show, in polytheistic societies, for the purpose of recognizing many value systems without boundaries, it is necessary to have the ability to unify confusion without consistency. Whether this comes about by a strong dictator who is granted religious authority or by religious ideology, to say that a polytheistic society is “tolerant” is “conditional.”

II. THE EXCLUSIVISM OF JAPAN'S POLYTHEISTIC WORLD

Let's try a little more to verify aspects of "religion and society" in the situation of polytheistic Japan. Japan's intellectuals and politicians who put an end to the mono-religious warlike world which brought about the genocide and war, recognized the gods believed by other people, did not raise the sword of one correct meaning, and became open to different value systems. They theorized the development of a "multi-cultural society tolerant of polytheism" which would be tolerant of pluralism and would point to the world of the 21st century based on Japan's ancient polytheistic religious view and the value of cultural fusion filled with the enterprising character of Japanese society (Umehara 1990: 11, Yamaori 1995: 4). Because of this, has Japanese society, which values cultural fusion filled with Japan's polytheistic view of religion and temperament, really built a "tolerant multi-cultural society"? Or, has it strengthened the idea of "harmony (*wa*)" which unifies the group through exclusivism within the group?

II.A. The Idea of "Harmony" and Groupism

The special characteristic of the idea of "harmony", in the "17 Provisions" stated by Shotoku Taishi (Nakamura 1970: 407-415), is a cooperative principle which strengthens the emperor-centered ritualistic solidarity. This principle makes oneself nothing for the benefit of others, and is considered the basis of the "public" way (moral sense of government history) to national (imperial) unification (Watanabe 1980: 32, Watsuji 1962: 82). The function of "harmony" is the emotional fusion of group members for "the unity of everyone." In rice production in ancient clan society, cooperative labor and cooperative irrigation were essential, and "festivals" related to a supernatural being recognized by the cooperative group beyond the individual (Kamishima 1961: 25, 94). Eventually the ancient person's sense of the divine and "festival" led to a national structure with an emperor-centered centralization of power. The psychology of "harmony," which promoted emotional unity within the framework of the idea of one ruler for all the people, expanded to the level of the central government, the community and the household. "To disturb harmony" is to disturb the unity of each group, and means to harm the self-indulgent authority relationship.

II.B. Are the Gods of Japan Really Selfless and Abounding in Compassion?

What is the substance of the polytheistic religious view and value of cultural fusion in Japan until now? The mythological gods shown in Japanese participate in emperor veneration and ritualistic festivals are said to have the special characteristics of the "feeling of harmony and the love of solitude" (Watsuji 1962: 85-90). This means the gods do not show anger, opposition or revenge, but intentionally set aside self-will and abound in compassion. As a result, emperor-centered ritualistic leadership is benevolent rule based on affection, and the emperor's deity also is said to include love and respect that is filled with

“the feeling of harmony and the love of solitude.” This selfless affection enlivens the participants of every cooperative group, producing concord and justice (public righteousness). Because selfless affection is social justice, the gods revealed in mythology are affectionate gods, unlike the vengeful gods of monotheistic religion. Therefore, Amaterasu Omikami, instead of punishing blasphemers, retreated to Iwayado and decided to entrust the penalty for blasphemy to a meeting of 8 million gods. In this way, she is an affectionate god who, instead of punishing by herself, punishes by means of a public meeting. This emphasizes the god who sets aside “self” and stands in the “public” position. Watsuji concludes that the god of “absolute monarchy” who claims absolutism and monism and who excludes other gods is a god who tries to rule the world as the “I”, and cannot be a god of true justice (1962: 89).

This conclusion seems to have in mind the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This tradition uses “public” rule rather than “self” rule to explain the road to the realization of divine justice. But the form of this “public” accountability is unclear. Social group responsibility makes the subject of responsibility vague, and subsequently the route to reform remains indefinite. Also, how the god who “withdraws” to put aside “self” is to be comprehended in the “subject of responsibility” is unclear. As for the judgment of sin being entrusted to the public assembly rather than judging for oneself, at first glance polytheism really seems to show tolerant justice. But in this case, in which the relationship between personal and public responsibility is not evident, at what point does the danger of irresponsibility in which no one takes responsibility occur? Rather, isn’t the Christian God, “the god who punishes himself instead of the blasphemer”, the self taking responsibility for the great sin of the blasphemer? Isn’t the Trinitarian God of Christianity the affectionate god who, along with the justice of judging the great sin, does not leave the great sinner unforgiven? The mythological gods are thought cleverly to put justice and affection to proper use in the “public” meeting. In contrast, Christ’s cross for sin atonement reconciles “righteousness and love.” Didn’t Christ, without regard that He was God’s Son, deny “self” and entrust himself to the Jewish council and the Roman authority, submitting himself to their judgment, to become the means of atonement for sin?

II.C. The “Harmony” of Group Consciousness and the Avoidance of the “Individual”

This sense of “harmony” is developed in the household group which nurtures the Japanese people’s group consciousness, in village society, and in the family-nation mindset. In the former pre-war civil law, when the household was the seat of ancestor veneration and the center of orderly authority centered on the head of the household, “harmony” was understood to result from each member of the household doing their “part.” A person who disturbed this “harmony” exposed the strength of exclusiveness. The exclusiveness and assimilation of the household group was a positive and negative effect of “harmony”. This exclusiveness was diverted both in village society and in the nation, as “ostracism” in the former and as the “non-citizen” (alien) was the object of exclusion in the latter.

Even now, 60 years after the war, the culturally fluid Japan society which has a polytheistic view of religion is not necessarily tolerant towards various faiths and beliefs. The psychology of “harmony” nurtured in history even now lives. Certainly, Japanese society has become an environment in which the “autonomous individual” is respected, but even now “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” Koguma Eiji, who distinguishes the relationship of the “group” and the “individual,” says first the group exists, and then the “individual” is extracted as a result of estrangement. Therefore, it is only when there is a disturbance of “harmony” and order within the group that the “individual” comes to be sensed. Today, the information overload of mass communication provides a notable example. When a single person who has excelled appears, simultaneously every station praises that person. But when the person fails or makes a mistake, like a slap in the face, simultaneously the same person is bashed. “When everyone is among the waves there is no fear” is a present-day expression of Japanese “harmony” which brings together assimilation and exclusivism.

III. CHRISTIANITY’S MONOTHEISM AND ITS MULTIPLICITY

III.A. The Church’s Calling in a Polytheistic World

The biblical world, however, does not assume the existence of polytheism. On the contrary, it is said concerning “idol worship,” that people who do not recognize the “Creator” who created heaven and earth, worship everything created by the Creator rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:23, 25). Idol worship is described as the empty thoughts of fallen human beings and the reflections of dark hearts. In order to divide the Hebrews from the polytheistic society of Egypt, Moses commanded at Mt. Sinai that only the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” is “God.” (Ex. 20:1-12, Deut. 6:14). At first glance, this God was misunderstood as Israel’s tribal god who benefited only Israel, excluding other peoples. However, this was not the truth. Rather, Israel was “a Kingdom of Priests” (Ex. 19:6) entrusted with a calling from God to show that “Israel’s God is the God of the whole world, and through Israel every people is to be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Israel was chosen to serve as a “servant” in order to give other peoples the blessing of knowing the true God. In not carrying out this calling and keeping God and his blessing for themselves, the Hebrews exalted their sense of national election so that Israel also became the object of God’s judgment (Amos 9:7). And this calling given to Israel was handed over to the “church” which is the spiritual Israel.

III.B. The Oneness and Universality of God the Creator

In the context of the polytheistic Greco-Roman world, Paul emphasized that the God of the Jews was also the God of the Gentiles on the basis of the oneness of God based on God the Creator (Rom. 3:29-30). In this passage it is clear that the biblical God is not only the (exclusive) God of the Jews, but also the (universal) God of the people of the whole world. In this context, the one Creator God who revealed Himself through Jesus

Christ, by His atonement and reconciliation, showed His love for the people of all nations. Moreover, the invitation to know this God and this salvation is not a religious conversion that results from strength (power); it is through “faith” as a result of human free will. In the way this faith is revealed, linguistic and cultural diversity is intended so that an abundant and deep understanding of God is experienced. Moreover Paul, against the polytheistic Corinthian Christians in the polytheistic land where there are “many gods” and many “lords”, said other than “the One God” there are no gods, and other than “the One Lord Jesus Christ” there is no lord (1 Cor. 8:4-6). And by making clear the relationship between idols and evil spirits, Paul emphasizes that they should that what is offered to idols is not offered to God but to evil spirits (1 Cor. 10:20). This points to the one true God as the origin of everything, but also to “many gods” and “many lords” who reveal the work of the “powers of darkness” (evil spirits) among people.

III.C. The Exclusivity and Mutuality of the Trinitarian God

When the Old Testament says, “There is One God,” we must remember this God is “God the Trinity.” This God who is “One” is also three, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who maintain “harmony” within a fellowship of love. In the nature of this “Three in One” God, the exclusivism which has the nature of “oneness” and individual cooperation which is shown in the “three”, unlike anything else shows the origin and basis which makes consistent harmony possible. The work of creation of the Trinitarian God is an example. God the Father is the basis of all existence, God the Son is the reasonable orderly principle (Logos) of the created world, and God the Holy Spirit is the giver and preserver of life (Shuebel 1998:75). However, human beings created in the “image of God” rebelled, revolted against the order of creation, and became living “corpses.” As a result, among human beings there is exclusion and prejudice towards those who are different which strengthens assimilation and conformity. However, God the Father, in Jesus Christ, provided the way to restore human relationships. By means of Him, the enmity between people was done away with (Eph. 2:15). God the Holy Spirit, by means of Jesus Christ, “through faith” actualizes reconciliation with God and reconciliation between human beings. In the work of each Person of the Trinity “the one work of salvation and reconciliation” is completed. The dynamic relationship of “the one and the many” brings about “the unity in diversity”, and in Christ through the body of cooperative faith (the church) the created world comes to life (Gal. 3:28). Monotheism which believes in the Trinitarian God (Trinitarianism), in church history, in the Middle Ages encouraged a ritually unified structure in the church-ruled society and in the early days of the modern era sanctioned absolute monarchy based on the theory of the right of kingship received from God. However, among believers in biblical monotheism, against nationalistic intolerance based on Israel’s sense of election, equality with other peoples before the absolute one God is explained (Amos 9:7) (Nishitani 2004:208). In this way, Trinitarianism is a view of God which is able to avoid the absolutism produced from the uniformity and identity of simple

monotheism, to avoid the confusion produced from the polytheism's pluralistic sense of values, to repair what was broken by the fall of the created world, and to truly bring about reconciliation and symbiosis.

CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus' "Parable of the Sower," is necessary for understanding the nature of the Kingdom of God (Mark 4:13). For this reason, it is recorded in all four Gospels. The Lord Jesus clarifies its meaning, but thinking from the perspective of the title it is "the sower" and "the soil." The sower sows "the word of the Gospel," but in this two things are supposed. First, there is freedom to reject hearing it and the final result is not bearing fruit. Second, the greatness of the blessing that is promised is that the person who hears the word of the Gospel bears fruit.

Our Lord is not like a bulldozer who overpowers everyone forcing their conversion. In his parable, there is an environment where the gospel is freely proclaimed and heard and an environment in which people can freely respond to the proclaimed Gospel. What sort of world or society brings about this kind of environment? This will not be a society "ritually unified" by nationalism or by religious nationalism. Also, it will not be a society fragmented and confused by polytheism. In the multicultural, pluralistic societies of the contemporary world, we must form a mature society which, while recognizing diversity, produces reconciliation and symbiosis. A society must be sought in which true "religious freedom" is preserved so that it is possible for people to proclaim and confess faith and doctrine freely. And within this "Gospel of the Kingdom of God," there power to produce unity and symbiosis in diversity.

SOURCES

梅原猛 [新春対談:日本人を語る]朝日新聞、1990年1月8日 11面

小川忠 『原理主義とは何か』講談社現代新書、2003年

小熊英二 『単一民族神話の起源』新曜社、1995年

神島二郎 『近代日本の精神構造』岩波書店、1961年

クリストフ・シュヴェーベル「二 個別性・普遍性・諸宗教一宗教の神学の構築をめざ

して」『キリスト教は他宗教をどう考えるか: ポスト多元主義の宗教と神学』

G.デコスタ編、森本あんり訳、教文館、1998年

中村元責任編集 『日本の名著2 聖徳太子』中央公論社、1970年

西谷幸介 『宗教間対話と原理主義の克服: 実際倫理的討論のために』新教出版社、

2004年

山折哲雄 「日本人の可能性」朝日新聞、1995年8月10日 4面

渡部正- 『日本古代・中世の思想と文化』大明堂、1980年

和辻哲郎 『和辻哲郎全集第十二巻』岩波書店、1962年