

# Religion and Morality in Advanced Mass Societies

## -Moving Beyond Americanism-

By Nishibe Susumu

### Introduction

D. Bell's "demise of ideology" thesis is absolutely true in the sense that rigorous political values such as socialism have been dying. It is impossible to recognize as a whole today's "great society" which has caused complex differentiation, and because of this, inciting total and radical reform (revolution) against society must be regarded as ineffective.

The differentiation of society corresponds to the diversification of individual desires. To think that it is possible for the leaders of society or the planning authorities to ascertain and estimate that diversity, merely reflects the "arrogance of intellectuals" (F. V. Hayek). All intellectual planning is capable of doing is amassing local and gradual reforms based on "piecemeal social engineering" (K. R. Popper). Consequently, the collapse of Sovietism at the end of the 20th century and the "victory of liberal democracy" (F. Fukuyama) were historical inevitabilities. In short, voluntary actions of individuals and groups are spontaneously adjusted, through democratic systems in politics, and through the market mechanism in economics, and one cannot help but think that society experiences organic growth as a result.

This means that people living in contemporary society have a comprehensive understanding neither of the big picture of their own society nor, therefore, of the future possibilities that await it. It is natural that such a

psychological state drives people to feelings of apprehension and insecurity. Rather, somewhat paradoxically, "the demise of political ideology" facilitates the birth (or revival) of "meta-political ideology."



Stock prices have soared to a record high in the U.S., which exemplifies the role of the market mechanism in contemporary society

Photo: Kyodo News

However, because the "demise of ideology" is what can be seen on the surface of society today, the "desire for religion" will most assuredly not develop below the surface. Religion has often risen to a cult-like frenzy, and congealed into a fundamentalist bias. In the new century it will be crucial for religion to be assigned an appropriate social position within the environment of rapid progress toward an advanced information-based society, thereby preventing advanced information itself from destroying individual lives and social institutions.

### The Nightmare of Relativism

A return to absolutism, whether pre-modern or ultra-modern, is impossible for any sane person today. Actively proclaiming to have attained absolute knowledge of what is true or to have arrived at the absolute value of justice is merely the result of vanity or madness. In that sense, the thesis of relativity, which says that perception and values can only be measured relative to the standpoint of the person discussing them (and to feelings and rationale based on that standpoint), is something

with which we can concur.

However, every human being is capable of some degree of understanding of others' viewpoints, and it is therefore possible for multiple viewpoints (often contradictorily) to coexist within a single person. Consequently, if a person does not take a somewhat absolutist posture of debating the advantages and disadvantages of those viewpoints, it will become impossible for anyone to

A typical meta-political ideology is the structure of religious thought. By either consciously or unconsciously reviving religion, contemporary man has begun to comprehensively understand individual life and social history. Actually, if this does not happen there is a tendency for the diversity of desires to disrupt individual living and for differentiation to dismantle social institutions. That is what has happened today.



make a choice regarding perception and values. This would be a mental state of nihilism, and a pathological tendency toward nihilism is indeed remarkably evident in the relativism adopted by people today.

To avoid this pathology, people today have secretly turned their backs on the relativism which they once publicly claimed to adopt and have reluctantly chosen a thing which must be called degenerate absolutism. That is, they have chosen to flock toward that which offers them the most immediate convenience or which goes with the flow of the times. If we call this credulity, then relativistic nihilism causes absolutist credulity. This does not, however, mean that we completely toss out our feelings for relativism which is inherently skeptical of credulity. In fact, as that skepticism swells, we revert once again to nihilism. It is this kind of mental cycle under which the people of today groan.

Across time and space the most outstanding philosophers have long sought an absolute standard of truth and justice to overcome the apprehension and insecurity of relativism, all the while knowing that the results of absolute research inevitably lead to relativism. The very question of how to achieve spiritual balance between absolutism and relativism is the original meaning of "skepticism." It is the act of being "thoughtful." As far as I know, such a sense of equilibrium cannot be achieved except through historical wisdom or traditional *bon sens* (common sense).

Because modernity, and especially contemporary society, has run toward a stupidity of discovering progress all the while destroying things historical and traditional, it has become virtually submerged in the nightmare of relativism. The natural reaction to this is an occasional revelry in the madness of absolutism, such as exertion of the power of cult-like fervor and fundamentalist bias.

### **The Spiritual Prison of Mass Society**

The relativism of nihilism and the

absolutism of fanaticism are appearing today as phenomena of mass society. The term "mass man," as he will be referred to here, refers to man's existence neither in the social class that "lacked education and assets" in the 19th century, nor in the political class that "was agitated and manipulated by leaders" in the early half of the 20th century. Rather, he exists in a "human or spiritual class" (J. Ortega). In other words, the term points to a person "who has lost his sense of balance" between relativism and absolutism.

Because the masses kicked off the search for absolutes, they have neither a "guilt culture" nor a "shame culture" (R. Benedict). That is, because they have neither religious precepts nor moral sanctions, they are earnestly pursuing industrialism as a way of realizing many of their desires, and are pushing toward democratism as a way of prioritizing the desires of the social majority.

However, because they are embracing nihilism in their most earnest desires, the masses cannot be satisfied by the realization of their existing desires, and in the end, cannot but aim for new desires. Discovering extraordinary meaning in the very newness of those hopes is what mass society is all about. In that sense, contemporary society holds a deep-seated hidden potential for revolution. Proof of this is that in America, for example, the new president arose on the wings of the campaign slogan "change now" and in Japan the new prime minister came to power during a time of emphasis on "drastic reform." An overview of society reveals that the masses are flocking for brand new products in both the US and Japan.

However, today's magic word, "revolution," lacks even a remnant of the conservative implication of the original meaning of the word, "again (re-) turning or twisting (volution)." As in the style of the French and Russian revolutions, destroying the old is the kind of revolution the masses prefer. The problem is that

there are many options to choose from. One would expect that deciding which of the multiple new possibilities to choose would be an undertaking that would fundamentally incorporate research on "truth and justice." However, because this undertaking has been abandoned, the masses merely fall, in a short time, for the most exciting, most fashionable novelty.

### **Meltdown of Liberal Democracy**

Liberty has won out over control, and democracy has outdone despotism. This should not be doubted, and should in general be recognized as a reality worth welcoming. However, in an unsound system, liberalism will degrade into libertinism, and if there is no healthy forum of public debate, democracy will fall into ochlocracy. Where do a sound system and a healthy public opinion come from? A mass society is run by regarding these things as being guaranteed by the desires of the masses. That, however, is an overestimation of excessive humanism. The opinion circulated during the era of enlightenment in the 18th century that humanism contains perfectivity, that is, that liberated humans will approach a state of perfection in terms of intelligence and morality, is clearly only dogma. The original meaning of the word "dogma" is "to seem to be good," but seeing things as good without a basis for doing so is mere wishful thinking.

Liberty is something that is expressed freely by human individuality. Generally speaking, however, that individuality is thought of as being shaped within an historical environment. Consequently, to preserve the essence of a system historically shaped and derived is to protect human individuality (or liberty). In that sense, true liberals have to be good historicists. Conservative thought in England accepts a certain degree of relationship between liberty and order. That is, according to the "prescription as an effect of time continuity" (E. Burke), it is important that the position that



humans have to be free is "already (pre-) established (scription)." In the same way, democracy also has to be founded on a prescription, because a sound forum for public debate is established when the masses value that prescription.

The specific content of a prescription (that has a time effect) is suggested as a result of careful deliberations held by the masses (and their representatives) in accordance with the circumstances. However, for these deliberations to be sound, again, there have to be rules for conducting the debate based on the prescription, and the specific content of those rules also have to be established through deliberation. A circular argument cannot be avoided when talking about prescriptions. The important thing is "correctly penetrating" (M. Heidegger) the cycle. In any case, an excessive progressivism that sets up neither standards of good sense nor historical hints that suggest such standards will only be able to produce a democracy of simple majority rule. The concept of regarding the majority as possessing greater truth and justice is a mere mistake of "applying the principal of equality to intellect" (A. de Tocqueville), and is the basis of a democratism marked by the "despotism of the majority."

### Fear of "Videocy"

When public opinion has a widespread influence merely by being the opinion of objective bystanders, and when that opinion, as we saw earlier, seeks novelty, "videocy" (M. McLuhan) more than "literacy" will begin to sway the deliberations of the masses. "Videocy" refers to a sensitivity toward images (or sounds). Actually, as can be seen in the straightforward example of the coined word "televangelism," stimulating the videocy of the masses is an essential means of inciting democratic agitation in the political arena and of publicizing the market principle in the economic arena.

As power over videocy becomes the key to social order, so called virtual

reality is beginning to control the sense and reason of contemporary society. Virtual reality is "seeing something that looks real, but that is actually a mere fabrication." Of course, all phenomena have a virtual character to people who live by producing, distributing, and consuming symbolic meaning. Things that have thus far been called reality have actually been elements of virtual reality characterized by stability and durability. Topics of imagined reality are beginning to circulate precisely because the virtual reality that had stability and continuity from the cosmos of human society's symbolic meaning is beginning to wane.

In other words, imagined reality is "virtual reality that is extremely exciting but only lasts for a short period of time," and it breeds in today's videocy-oriented society. Public opinion in democracy as well as trades in the market structure are already developing as virtual reality based on this kind of videocy. The development of ways to expand and accelerate that growth is being cultivated as a way to move toward an advanced information-oriented society.

Further examination will show that there is not only a single choice when it comes to imagined reality. But since standards for decision-making have already been thrown out in mass society, the imagined reality that is most frank and thus has been most widely transmitted to the masses will come to envelop society. If we point to conditions in which individuals and groups that have the power to promote this kind of process usurp virtually all the power in every arena, and we call this an advanced mass society, then the latter half of the 20th century was the era in which such advanced mass societies were established in the advanced nations. A demagogy, or a system of agitating the masses, was established. "Once a civilization falls into the hands of a demagogue, rescuing it is impossible" (J. Ortega). Consequently, like it or not, contemporary society is being eroded by nihilism.

### Distortion of the Symbolic Cosmos

The symbolic cosmos of humans fundamentally has a TEAM structure. That is, when a balance is maintained between the four functions of (T) transmitting meaning, (E) expressing meaning, (A) accumulating meaning, and (M) measuring meaning, and when a social structure that makes that possible is maintained, the symbolic cosmos becomes characterized by stable continuity. However, with the expansion of advanced information technologies, the expression (E) and transmission (T) functions have been greatly expanded, while the accumulation (A) and measurement (M) functions have strangely been reduced. In that sense, the symbolic cosmos has become distorted.

No matter how stimulating, expressive activities that do not make reference to the historical accumulation of meaning and value will be disconcerted. Meaning and value transmission activities that ignore cultural measurement, no matter how rapidly they occur, will be merely mediocre. In that sense, contemporary society may be being exposed to a tide of vulgarization. Because people who hold out in a backlash against vulgarization cannot be at all optimistic about the results of that opposition, they will incite active nihilistic activities that can only be called Ludditeistic. Actually though, the majority will likely abandon such futile opposition and lapse into a passive nihilism.

In either case, vulgarization colors the dominant principles of contemporary society, individualism and technoism. That is, the two-tone color of "individual liberty" and "technological rationality" are today regarded as the most universal, but both tend toward a future-oriented approach to novel expressions of information, and do not attempt to take a past-oriented approach to retracing the historical accumulation of meaning and value information. They also tend toward an others-oriented approach to rapid information transmission, and do not attempt a



self-reflexive approach of making reference to cultural measurements of meaning and value.

In the end, progress toward an advanced information-oriented society is expanding the superficial structure of meaning (of the individual's life) and value (of the social system), and is facilitating the decay of the deep structure. If we concur on the "separation of civilization and culture" (O. Spengler) and assume that while civilization is technological, culture is spiritual, contemporary society may find itself afflicted with an imbalance between the development of civilization and a breakdown of culture.

### **Mistakes of Social Experimentalism**

A separation between civilization and culture is the conclusion of a social experimentalism that assumes that despite a great society emerging following the collapse of a premodern community, the entire society can achieve progress by undertaking grand social experiments in that great society. Certainly human beings are animals that essentially apply meaning to their own experiences, and experience is exposing oneself to peril. For that reason, experience and experiments (exposure to peril) are synonyms, but the latter has very little sense of imbuing the perils that one faces with meaning. In other words, experimentalism is the craft of being created a venturesome spirit (or a spirit of risk taking).

Information technology (IT) and a venturesome spirit (VS), the two arms of social experimentalism, are moving forward today with unprecedented speed. Modern technoism converges in IT while individualism converges in VS, but the social arena where both can be most freely active is the market structure. Emphasized by many economists, entrepreneurship itself means "taking (preneur)" "the interval (entre)," or earning a margin. Because this kind of venturesome spirit has reached its highest height ever, society has already begun to get a taste of revolution.

The spirit of revolution advocated by socialists lies in the frustration caused by the difficulty of intentionally planning the shape of an entire society. The final victory of liberal democracy is nothing other than the dissemination of the spirit of revolution, which has already failed, throughout the entire society. The combination of IT and VS points to the creation of a system that has internalized destructive behaviors that fall under the heading of revolution. Such a society throws its system of values (and the criteria upon which they are based) into a constant state of unrest, which can only be endured by a society of artificial people (cyborgs). As can be seen in the futuristic stories that incorporate such beings that have come out of America, social experimentalism will eventually result in the robotization of human beings.

However, this experimentalism is likely, sooner or later, to face major failure. Why? Because human beings are linguistic beings (*homo-loquens*), and when language is separated from history (A) and culture (M), it starts to die. The loss of the ability for language would be extremely agonizing for human beings, and for that reason, the combination of IT and VS would start to collapse as soon as it reached its peak, much as a crested wave soon comes crashing down. In every country today the reevaluation of things national as well as the reconfirmation of national identity, national interest, and national policy based on those things is underway. The IT plus VS formula was a national feature of immigrant countries, like America, that lack a sense of history and a cultural consciousness. If we call this "Americanism," we might expect the early 21st century to be a time when anti-Americanism movements will erupt in every corner of the world.

### **Commonalities of Americanism and Sovietism**

It is a mistake to think that the end of the cold war structure brought the world into some kind of new era.

While America and the USSR may not be identical twins, they are certainly fraternal twins. Both seem positioned at the extreme ends of the spectra of individualism vs. collectivism, freedom vs. control, competition vs. planning, bureaucratic vs. market control, and dictatorship vs. democracy. However, as is clear from a situation in which dictatorship is brought about through democratic choice, both are homologous. To put it simply, Soviet-style civilization that destroys history and culture and American-style civilization in which those things are (for the most part) absent, are homogeneous in that they both use social experimentalism.

Another name for socialism is a "people's democracy." We must be careful to recognize that these are "people" and not "national people." If the national aspect comes to the fore, history and culture would have to be taken as things that could not be exposed to social experimentalism. An example of this is that we cannot speak lightly of human rights. "The concept of human rights is not recognized, but the concept of the rights of (citizens) national people can be widely accepted" (E. Burke). This shows that, first, rights are defined as "the possibility of freedom that recognizes things accomplished by rules (legal and moral)", and second the acknowledgement that "that basis of rules is national."

This common sense (*bon sens*) has not been established in the post-cold war world of the late 20th century. A legatech universalism has been established that combines legalism, which regards laws as being able to be created freely by contemporary people, and technoism in which technological rationality crosses national barriers. It goes without saying that America is the one shaking mightily this flag.

However, this view of the rules is wrong insofar as it overestimates the legal algorithm. Actually, America's lawsuit society is a debacle that is hard to even look at. Reason requires a premise and a framework, but those



cannot be proved by rationality itself. In other words, whether to take a premise and build a reasoning, or to place that reasoning in some kind of framework, is a problem of before reason and is ultimately determined by values (including common sense (*bon sens*)). Once morals as a support for law and values as a basis of reason become problems, Americanism cannot but fail. It is not so far from following in the footsteps of Sovietism in terms of losing its authority and experiencing a breakdown of power.

### The Illusion of Globalism

Insofar as the internationalism touted by the Soviet Union was planned with the unilateral support of the Comintern, it was not really internationalism in the strict sense. That is, it was not an attitude involving relations between (inter) countries (national), but a globalism that tried to change the world into a homogeneous value space. Likewise, American-led globalism is also a unilateral venture.

Of course, in the sense that activities in the information and financial fields have come to cover a wide spectrum, globalism is an unmistakable reality. However, that is actually merely an advanced level of internationalization. In other words, international relations have become more intimate and complex. What we cannot ignore is that the dissension between states that has accompanied the development of advanced internationalization is gradually intensifying. Globalism is merely a "word of disguise" (K. Jaspers) to camouflage that dissension. It is also a "treacherous word" (Jaspers) for inciting opposition to the state.

We must not forget that "the masses and technology are both in our hands" (Jaspers). Globalism is a "word of disguise" and a "treacherous word" which must "finally conquer that which is sacred." (Jaspers). The idea of global standards itself was devised to destroy the accumulation and long history of experiences of nations that hold sacred ideals. This is the mark that modern secularization has reached its target. When things have come



"The decline of value judgement capabilities";  
Nietzsche (1844-1900)

this far, contemporary man cannot help but be aware of the "decline of [his own] value judgment capabilities (F. Nietzsche). Every nation is different in terms of whether it has a guilt culture (religion), a shame culture (morality), or some combination of both, but in the new century mankind will take strides toward a renaissance of religious and moral values. If efforts are not taken to that end, even the meaning of death (and consequently the meaning of life) will not be able to be established, and our life and death will turn merely into a dance macabre.

### Demand for the Sacred

Comparisons of monotheism and polytheism are probably oversimplified. If we look at the ranking of gods in polytheism as the inevitable rationality of the human spirit, the idea of a "highest god" always arises. In that sense, the gap between monotheism and polytheism is reduced almost to extinction. In any case, "battles over gods" (M. Weber) will inevitably occur in the international community regarding which is the one true god, or which is the highest god. However, it is already clear that in the arena of religion, an attitude of "tolerance" (J. Locke) is needed. Because it is such tolerance from which we understand modern rationalism to have begun, we who enjoy the blessings of material prosperity and social equality that modernity has produced must not

return to premodern religious intolerance.

Those who claim to have been excluded from those blessings, however, do try to enter into "battles over gods." Such religious enthusiasm is beginning to run rampant in every corner of the world. We have to be aware that having tolerance also involves having patience. However, patience in this context does not mean having patience for beliefs held by others which you believe to be blasphemous. Tolerance means enduring the awareness of the absence of god in yourself and the instability that results from that absence, whether you have distanced yourself from things sacred, or whether you nonetheless long for that aspect of life but keenly feel that you are unable to approach the starting point of the meaning of life.

This will continue the general critique against the trend toward secularization in modern and contemporary society. The spirituality of people today is very critical due to the results of that secularization, and consequently we have fallen into a crisis that generates the radioactivity of apprehension and insecurity. To overcome this even a little, we must carve and polish our awareness of what our criteria of the value of human life are, through interpretations of history and culture. For better or worse, contemporary man has come a long way from his religious beliefs, and he must begin to study theology before he can adopt a belief system. Theological study requires comparative examinations of many belief religions. Tolerance today means knowing that religious faith cannot be obtained without a certain degree of understanding for the "strange gods" of others. JTI

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