

Religion and Contemporary Japanese Democracy

By *Inoki Takenori*

Public Spirit and Religion

I assume that among Japanese there are a relatively large number of people who express a wish to be loyal to themselves or live in a manner honest to themselves. But such an attitude is premised on their own integrity and certainty. Given that humans are an animal that often becomes egocentric and ignorant, preventing rational judgment, then their desire to be true to themselves only means that they are being carried away in an egocentric way. Nothing can be more inconsistent with religious feelings than such an attitude.

Religion is inherently apart from egocentricity and selfishness. In other words, religious sentiment is, in a way, a strong manifestation of public spirit (like joint salvation), though public spirit is manifest to various extents, from small communities to the entire world. Religious sentiment is preconditioned by two aspects of self-consciousness: that there exists in the world something that humans cannot understand, and humans are a creation. This being the case, religion has a paradoxical structure, as humans contemplate other people and the future, which represents public spirit, while making an issue of their own soul. In contemporary society, it seems as if the mythological aspect of religion is disputed by science, but mythology is enjoying a revival as people again turn their thoughts to religion. This is because religion and public spirit are closely interrelated in a democratic society.

Democratic society, as its formal and superficial structure shows, exists as a massive grouping of humans, like atoms, who believe in their ability to make their own judgements. However, contemporary people, who have the freedom of entirely relying on themselves, are not necessarily brimming with self-confidence and pride. Vast

amounts of knowledge and information tend to make people more concerned and skeptical. And, free individuals are threatened by solitude and silence left amorphous. Some people try to withstand the situation by sheer will and intelligence, but not everyone is capable of doing that.

People who are placed under such an unstable situation become more compassionate toward others, and such compassion generates collaborative hopes and public spirit, and forms a bond which binds atomized people in a democratic society. In a society where the choice of all values and the object of faith are left up to individuals' judgment, or in a society where the equality of opportunities is guaranteed to a considerable extent, people tend to be interested in pursuing economic welfare or materialistic desires as an expression of self-love. As a result, egocentricity tends to motivate people to become engrossed in their private lives unlimitedly at the expense of involvement in public affairs. It was religion that applied the brakes to these excesses.

A look at American history makes it easier to understand this point. The tradition of equality and individualism in the United States took shape in the form of pursuit of economic welfare, inclination toward mediocrity and isolationism. The base of such an attitude was supported by such bonds as compassion, public spirit, religion and morality. They expanded the spirit of self-love, which constitutes the basis of individualism and the market mechanism, to a dimension that includes the future life of humans and to an extent that embraces other people.

This is why religion is needed in democracy, as Alexis de Tocqueville, the 19th century French politician and writer, emphasized. Tocqueville meant that religion allows people to free themselves from all-encompassing self-

love and to reflect on matters of death and immortality. In other words, religion does not yield to democratic feelings or consequent economic welfare, but has the delicate mission of utilizing such feelings, while controlling them. It can be said that religion not only functions as an activator of society but has a delicate mission of serving as a balancer.

What would happen if religious feelings and the public spirit, that extend to other people and future life, are omitted from democracy? It is no exaggeration to say that this is the biggest problem facing contemporary society in advanced countries.

The True Nature of the Market Society

People do not share ideals of values in a market society, which lacks the common goal that a socialist society has. Thus a market society has often been criticized as "unsocial," because people in such a society are not united by a purpose as in religious communities or socialist countries, but instead by a means of market exchanges. Generally speaking, it is considered that if a man asserts that united action toward a common specific goal is beautiful but a cash nexus of unorganized people in a market society is ugly, that is proof that he is an intellectual.

Don Quixote, who regarded himself as an intellectual, all the time needed a villain that took the form of windmills. Humans suffer from an obsession that they have to understand in clear terms the environment in which they are placed and to correct not only nature but also society. Accordingly, it seems to intellectuals that capitalism and hedonism, which expand human desires, as well as factory systems, which efficiently use workers as tools, are a sacrilege against humanity.

Intellectuals' role in the industrializa-

tion age became unstable, because they were neither manager nor interpreter of gods words as in ancient society. They were neither lawyers serving the ruler nor darlings of salons who entertained noblemen as in pre-modern times. Intellectual people's influence expanded at least superficially in the industrialization age, which was the time when education spread with the rise of the publishing industry. In modern society, however, their power moved in two different directions. Firstly, their power took the form of enmity against the economic and social systems which constituted the basis of industrialization. Secondly, the standard of their words and the contents of their theories relatively declined due to the spread of education. In postwar Japan, intellectuals' enmity against greed for money and pursuit of profits also fueled their animosity toward the American-style market society. They regarded market society as a vice since in such a society people do not share ideals of value and only the cash-nexus expanded extraordinarily.

But these views entirely mistook the true nature of the market society. The market mechanism is a device for realizing the justice of exchanges, just as democracy is an instrument for realizing political equality. The true nature of the market mechanism lies in the fact that people do not engage in economic activities for a single, common and specific goal. In other words, the characteristic of the market mechanism is that unorganized economic activities of individuals produce harmony through market exchanges. It is a mechanism in which people mutually receive benefits by obtaining through exchange what other people have made and do not need to confirm what benefits other people get through exchange. The greater the difference of needs and purposes of people who exchange, the greater the benefits they receive. What market society needs is the objective establishment of a rule which determines to whom goods and services belong and by whose agreement and approval they are transferred.

In a market society, ideals of values are neither unified nor enforced other than freedom. In such a society, choices by free will are guaranteed to exist, but there are simultaneously possibilities of people making bad choices. Freedom means that humans have the freedom of turning bad. Put another way, judgment on right or wrong can exist only in free action. A falling stone is completely ruled by physical laws and there is no room for judgment on right or wrong. Accordingly, it can be said that vindication of freedom ultimately hinged upon humans' possession of the potential of making a good choice by free will. In order for free choices in markets not to produce great deviations, it is necessary to support market choices and the ethical base of the market mechanism from moral dimensions.

■ Danger of Fanaticism

As I have mentioned, publicness is an indispensable premise of democracy and the market society. But, why do people sometimes sense a dubious smell in religion? This is because people's cautiousness against the excesses that exist in democracy and the market mechanism also works against religion, possibly more strongly. Extremism and fanaticism could lead to destruction.

Stories about excesses causing destruction abound in religious, political and economic activities. Even justice, if it is to be fulfilled, could produce vices that totally undo its virtue itself.

The 18th century German writer Heinrich von Kleist's short story *Michael Kohlhaas* portrayed with strange dynamism what could happen in democratic processes. When his legitimate right was violated, the horse trader Kohlhaas, who is a paragon of a good citizen, tried to recover his right three times, but all in vain. Kohlhaas then thought that if his right was not recognized by other people, he could take action without being bound by law, and resorted to a violent action that plunged society into the depths of



Themis, Goddess of Justice

fear. As a result, his right was ultimately restored but he himself was sent to the gallows. Kohlhaas had accomplished one justice but he had to meet retribution for having violated the law.

Kleist's story in fact dealt with the interesting issue of balance in human society. Just as the statue of the Goddess of Justice holds a balance in one hand, justice originally meant the balance of "an eye for an eye." In reali-

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Police investigate Aum Shinrikyo's facilities

ty, problems of the balance of justice require comparison of a multitude of overlapping factors. Michael Kohlhaas did not take into account the fact that optimization of one justice would produce another imbalance. The love preached in religion or the workings of intelligence may serve as a power for making such consideration. On this point, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Medieval theologian and "Angelical Doctor" said that justice without love is cruel but love without justice is the mother of destruction.

■ Religion and Fanaticism

Religionists in general seem to be increasingly perplexed by the activities of the Aum Shinrikyo cult and other new religious organizations. Doubt persists that the guru and his aides of the Aum cult were engrossed in the completion of rule using wealth and science. But the problem is that although Aum's teachings are incoherent, there were disciples who were on

the verge of being spiritually awakened by the teachings. This is what annoys traditional religionists. Leaders of the Aum cult possessed the physiological knowledge that human's religious feelings could be associated with the use of drugs, lack of sleep and excessive hunger, as well as the weird coolness with which they peered through the cracks of the human mind.

What are the cracks of the human mind? People can hardly live without belief, though it is not necessarily religion. They look for those who agree with their beliefs and furthermore seek endorsement from authorities. Such an attitude represents the psychological ground of people who rely on organized religion. At a glance, life without belief is attractive as it is full of whims and indulgence. But, in fact, few people can withstand such a life. Humans can feel freedom only because there are restrictions and restraints on the other hand. Perhaps this is why teachings that people can be free with belief and religious disciplines are

born.

As such, belief requires sympathy from other people and endorsement from authorities, though it is merely a strong obsession. In this respect, the human pursuit of belief is closely related to the fact that humans are social animals. However, just as an overdose of medicine acts as a deadly poison, excessive belief could sometimes become destructive. We must bear this in mind when we think about what went on inside the Aum cult, whose actions startled the whole country.

Further analysis of the Aum cult is beyond my understanding. In contemporary times, however, people tend to think about everything in logical terms, as they try to find out the causes and give explanations. Thus, explanations of the Aum cult case focused on

the following two points – intellectual distortion of a group of elitists in the cult who majored in contemporary science in university, and the spiritual hollowing-out brought about by economic affluence. But these explanations are not convincing enough. Scientists do not necessarily become esoteric. Fanatical religious groups are not peculiarly a contemporary phenomenon. They existed in ancient and medieval times as well. Nobody can comprehend the Aum case without comprehending the violent power of human belief and logic.

When we hear what the Aum cult leaders said, we can notice that they sometimes gave explanations in detail to a weird extent, but at some other times their explanations suddenly became abstract. They tried to read other people's evil intentions or intrigues in all happenings. This is the outstanding characteristic of their logic. Arguments with these people can hardly be settled. Arguments by ordinary people are always accompa-

nied by restrictions of reality or by the weight of experience, whereas the Aum leaders' remarks contained only a token of logic. It is strange that the Aum leaders had little religious appearance except for their costumes. Their excessive self-justification represents the simple nature of people who believe in one thing.

If the Aum cult had planned a large-scale social disturbance, who would have protected ordinary people from the terror? Japanese people are inherently forgetful and have little sense of guilt over serious social disturbances. In a country where people let bygones be bygones, yesterday's enemies become today's friends.

Japanese people's strange feeling toward Saigo Takamori, who unsuccessfully rose up against the central government in a rebellion in the early stage of the Meiji era (1868-1912), serves as a reminder of their forgetfulness and tolerance of insurgency. An Englishman who viewed the bronze statue of Saigo in Tokyo's Ueno Park is said to have asked why a statue of such a rebel stands in a public park. Saigo committed suicide after he was defeated in the 1877 rebellion, known as the Seinan War, but he was posthumously awarded the senior grade of the third Court rank in a general amnesty granted at the time of the promulgation of the Constitution in 1889. An official record shows that Prime Minister Yamagata Aritomo delivered a congratulatory speech at the statue's unveiling ceremony in 1898.

As a sympathizer of Saigo, I do not like to see the Saigo affair serve as an example of the Japanese people's lack of a sense of nation. Given that Japan was kind of a federation prior to the abolition of clans and the establishment of prefectures, it is not appropriate to regard the Seinan War as a rebellion. Even so, it can be said that Japanese people's lack of a sense of nation, which leaves them unconscious of the graveness of a rebellious plot, has barely changed since the Edo period.

Religion as a Balancing Force

Historically, many religions came into being as result of excesses or optimization. But a genuine religion must be a peaceful existence that alienates extremism. If religion is essential to ordinary people, fanaticism conflicts with their peaceful social life. Religion must play a balancing role in order to preserve people's healthy spirit, which alienates excesses. I think that as a power to regain balance, eliminate excesses and think about the future and other people, only religion can unite people with transcendence in a right position.

Accordingly, we must pay attention to the protection of society from religious fanaticism. This is why the existence of various religions is essential, so that free competition among them attracts new followers. As long as a system allowing religious thought to be chosen in a free "market" exists, religious creeds cannot but be moderate. Otherwise, religion will either produce fanatics and become a tool of state power, or cause religious apathy that could lead to the creation of a state religion.

Religions had better not have too many specific commands or forbidden clauses in regard to people's lifestyle. In Christianity, commands and precepts are in large part abstract. One of the teachings of the New Testament says "Love thy neighbor as thyself." But it does not specify what to do as a specific action to be done in a given situation. Each individual chooses the action he/she deems best for his/her parents, children, friends and strangers. But humans cannot see whether God views their attitude as best for them.



Statue of Saigo in Tokyo's Ueno Park

As we dwell on these problems, we come to know that matters related to publicness and religion take on a full meaning only when conditions of human freedom are fulfilled. When a human chooses something freely, how does he/she view other people, the future and his/her own life and death? Only when he/she becomes more conscious of these matters, his/her publicness would become more substantial. It is leisure, silence and prayer that make his/her consciousness unflinching. **JS**

Inoki Takenori is a professor of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies. He specializes in labor economics, economic thought and the Japanese economy. His research focuses on public servants, white-collar workers and the development of human resources.