

# The Encounter between Western and Japanese Civilizations

## – An Essay on an Unfruitful Conflict between Monotheism and Polytheism –

By Kobori Keiichiro

### I

Within every nation, the history of the way the people think begins with doubts posed as a result of confronting the outside world. How was this world created? How is it sustained and what are the fundamental truths of the natural order that control the movement of the world? What is the nature of the powers unseen in the background that manipulate and control the destiny of human beings? Superceding the dimension of satisfying the everyday human needs for clothing, food and shelter, the history of human thought commences with just such metaphysical doubts posed by encountering the external world.

Among the Japanese nation, as with many other nations around the world, the initial inquiry evolved in the form of mythological considerations and resulted in the establishment of a myth of the creation of the world. In the case of the Japanese, however, this took the form of a myth of the formation of the country. They did not extend their inquiry as far as the creation of the entire universe. They inhabited a land blessed with bountiful sunlight, abundant rainfall and moderate seasons, and the natural environment was such that they did not lack for the fundamental materials for clothing and food. Within such tranquil living conditions, the notion was cultivated that they were indebted to gods that governed the natural phenomena which surrounded them. They thought that the mountains, seas, rivers, forests, trees, rocks, fields and springs had their respective patron gods, and that these gods protected the livelihood of human beings, gave consideration to human desires and provided the resources of life which humans needed.

Consequently, when humans became self-aware that they formed communities and were leading a social life, they believed that the will of the gods concealed in the surrounding nature stipulated the structure and the operation of the

society. Political administration was initiated when a community enshrined these gods in a shrine (which was, in many cases, a hill or a forest), conducted religious rites and sought the will of the gods in the form of an oracle. Hence “political administration” and “religious rites” were expressed by the same word “*matsurigoto*” in older times.

To Japanese in the mythological period, gods were such beings that governed all the natural phenomena from behind. They were also guardian deities of everyday life and as a matter of course took on the characteristics of functional deities. Among these functional deities did such a god rank the highest that administered religious rites (i.e. *matsurigoto*) and, namely, such a god ranked the highest also in the political administration. It followed as a matter of course that a clan or a family which was regarded as the descendants of such a god should be respected as the head of the nation. Thus, the *Tennō* – most commonly referred to as the emperor – has, from the beginning of the oral transmission of the memory of the people through the committing of that collective memory to the written word, been recognized as descending from the highest deity within the scheme of deities which formed the basis for the Japanese worldview.

Prior to coming to occupy the highest position among the gods, the god of the ancestors of the *Tennō* naturally enough attained that status through leadership disputes among the various clans who worshiped their own ancestral gods, and by rivalries and movement toward unification. It is important to notice that in this mythological age, within the disputes between the gods, even when a powerful family which venerated one god overcame a powerful family which venerated another god, there were no traces of the victor having annihilated the other party. The actual victor of a political dispute, by respectfully giving or admitting to have religious rites in

honor of the deity of the defeated side, prevented hostile feelings from remaining as resentment. This is exemplified, among others, by the following two historical facts. The clan of the descendants of the heavenly gods, ancestor of the current *Tennō*, originated in Takamanohara in southern Kyushu, and when it entered the Yamato region (now Nara Prefecture) during the so-called “eastern expedition” and subjugated the *Omononushi* (Great Masters of Things) family, greatest of the local powerful clans, it hospitably venerated the deity of that opponent clan – *Omononushi-nokami* in Mt. Miwa, appeasing the clan’s anger. Similarly it is known that when the Izumo clan withdrew from leadership struggles to Izumo province (now Shimane Prefecture), the victors showed consideration for the defeated deity by permitting the construction of the Grand Shrine of Izumo.

In the struggles among the deities, settlement was always reached in the form of appeasement or allowing a coexistence of the various superior and lesser deities, and this experience of the ancient people was in due time highly influential when in the mid-sixth century Buddhism arrived via the Korean Peninsula. The splendidly featured Buddhist images introduced were received as “deities from abroad” and they were astounding to the Japanese people who did not have the custom of sculpturing images of the deities. The deities for the Japanese were believed to simply “exist” as they were invisible in simple wooden shrines called *yashiro* in the forest. The buddhas which were “deities from abroad” took visible form, and to Japanese eyes they were exquisite and solemn. For the spiritual life of the Japanese, this encounter was a truly epoch-making change. When Buddhism was initially introduced, a political power struggle ensued between the pro-Buddhist group and the anti-Buddhist group, but the Japanese eventually worked out a solution based on their



previous experiences which could calmly settle the strife between the indigenous gods and the deities from other parts. That is, they achieved peaceful coexistence between the Japanese deities and the buddhas which originated in India and were deeply steeped in the character of the Han-Chinese mainland. An unusual, and in a certain sense excellent, expedient was used in attaining this coexistence – putting the gods and buddhas together. It was the doctrine that the deities of Japan were actually manifestations of the buddhas which originated in India.

## II

In addition to images of the buddhas visible to the human eye, the Buddhism which was introduced to Japan also brought Buddhist philosophy in the form of sacred texts. Buddhism was a “universal religion” which originated in India and began to spread its influence over China and the Korean Peninsula. Through this encounter, the Japanese awakened to the fact that the particular religious rites of their ancestral deities, which retained the characteristic of veneration of nature deities, ought to be viewed as their own characteristic folk religion. Therefore the history of Japanese thought took the form of a double-structured belief in which the local “Truth of the Gods (Shintoism)” coexisted peacefully with the universal “Teaching of the Buddha (Buddhism).”

The “Truth of the Gods” was a folkway wherein the people determined a spiritual stance by means of religious rites at a place called a *yashiro* or shrine, and there was no verbalized doctrine. The first time the Japanese encountered a written religious theory was when they came into contact with Buddhist scriptures. These sacred writings extensively and deeply permeated the spirit of the people, and it can be said that this was the first time that the Japanese learned philosophy.

When people struggled to explain events and phenomena that occurred in the historical world, they had no alternative to explaining these occurrences as manifestations of the will of the gods. However, the “Truth of the Gods” had no doctrines or tenets, so it was difficult

for human beings to surmise and conjecture what the will of the gods was. Whether humans understood the oracles of the gods or found them incomprehensible, there was little they could do other than listen with awe.

To the Japanese, who in a sense had still not exceeded the dimension of mythological considerations, Buddhism taught the reason of the law of cause and effect in the historical world. The very concept of explaining the events of the historical world in terms of a “law of reason” was the first experience for the Japanese. Over a period of more than 600 years from the introduction of Buddhism to Japan until the end of the 12th century, the Japanese became accustomed to explaining history in terms of the law of cause and effect in a Buddhist sense and did so quite skillfully. Accumulate virtue and virtue will be the reward; accumulate evil and evil will be the reward. In any event, this law of reason gave order to the world. If one wants a good effect, then one need simply avoid an evil effect by accumulating good causes. This being the law that controls human destiny, if one follows the commands that spring from this law of reason, one can live in peace and take refuge in this world. To the degree that this law of reason is in control and therefore order is maintained, this world is a place where one can live in peace.

Through the Heian period (794-1192) – the name literally meaning “peace and tranquility” – there was peace, the *ritsu-ryō* system (criminal laws and administrative regulations) maintained the stability of the ordered society, and the elegance of court culture gently permeated as far as the tastes of the common people. But in the middle of the 12th century, society confronted a rapid change. The *bushi* (warrior) class suddenly rose to power, monopolized the use of physical force and intervened in the power struggles between powerful families with sheer force. Beginning with the Hōgen Disturbance in 1156 and continuing for 30 years through the defeat of the Taira clan (1185) in the Taira-Minamoto War, the people experienced the irrationality of a human world that could not be explained by the mere law of reason of cause and effect professed

Photo: Kobe City Museum



Francisco de Xavier (1506-1552), a Jesuit missionary, who discovered the “rationality” in the Japanese

by Buddhism.

The period of upheaval was eventually brought to an end by the military force of the *bushi*, and the military class replaced the class of the nobility in controlling political affairs. The center of administration moved to the Kantō region (centered on the south-eastern part of Kanagawa Prefecture), with the headquarters of the victorious Minamoto clan therein, and the Kamakura period (1192-1333) began. The prototype of modern Japan was formed during this period, and it is an important period which divides the ancient and the modern within Japanese history. The *bushi* no longer placed trust in the *ritsu-ryō* system of the earlier age which had already shown signs of systematic fatigue. At that time, the major political issue in Japan was whether administrators had the legal capacity to make decisions in territorial disputes which would be acceptable to both parties in the disagreement.

The military class which served as the political administration of the Kamakura Bakufu (shogunate) employed the observances of their own class as the positive law and applied it to all cases, settling one difficult territorial dispute after another and gaining the trust of the *bushi* class as a whole. The key to legal settlements was the word *dōri* (the universal truth). In 1220, Jien, the abbot of the Tendai sect of Buddhism, wrote a philosophical history titled, *Gukanshō* (*The Future and the Past*). Having personally experienced the 30 years of the Taira-Minamoto War, Jien reflected back on history since the first Tennō of Japan and sought to determine the ultimate truth of what governed the flow of



history. *Gukanshō* is a profound work which ponders history, coming to the conclusion that the answer lies in the word *dōri* (the universal truth). The discovery of the *dōri* was the critical event in Japanese intellectual history, making the Kamakura period the beginning of modern Japan. The most significant key that made the Kamakura Bakufu able to settle successive territorial disputes was the successful translation of the *dōri* into practical applications.

Japan was once again plunged into turmoil 120 years after Jien's contemplations. On this occasion, known as the Namboku-chō period (the period of the Northern and Southern Courts) which lasted for about 60 years from 1331 to 1392, the result was an unprecedented and unrepeatable rule by two separate Imperial Courts. At the beginning of this period, the court noble Kitabatake Chikafusa, faced with this extraordinary political event, found it unavoidable to give deep thought to the consequences of the *dōri*. The outcome of his contemplations was delineated in *Jinnōshōtōki* (*An Account of Our Divine Sovereigns and True Royal Line*), an important work on historical philosophy, which follows Jien's previous work. The *dōri* was sophisticated and came close to what Confucianism calls Tian Ming (the voice of the transcendental). Through the experience of actual historical events, the Japanese soon had come near to the dimension of the transcendental. The conception of the *dōri* elevated to a transcendental dimension is often called *Tentō* (the truth of the cosmos). The word itself had of course appeared in documents from as early as the seventh century and then frequently in those of the Heian period, but it now became charged with a highly metaphysical meaning.

### III

In December 1547, Francisco de Xavier (1506-1552) met a Japanese at the base of Christian proselytizing activities of the Society of Jesus in Malacca in the Malay Peninsula. It was no chance encounter, as the Japanese, a *bushi* of the Satsuma (Kagoshima) clan named Ikehata Yajiro, had heard rumors of the eminent Xavier and had wandered

the land looking for him for over a year, finally encountering him at Malacca. This encounter was also the "discovery of the Japanese" for Xavier's side.

Careful details of the events of this period are recorded in Xavier's well-known collection of letters, *Epistolae S. Francisci Xaverii aliaque eius scripta* (a complete Japanese translation is available), and among them special attention should be paid to the section which says that Xavier discovered *ratio* (reason) in Yajiro. To Xavier, Yajiro was different from any other Asian he had encountered in five years of propagating Christianity in Southeast Asia. Xavier had departed from Lisbon and come into contact with non-Christian peoples, and Yajiro appeared to him to be the very first person he had met who possessed the power to "reason." If all Japanese were like Yajiro, he thought, the Japanese people might be the only non-Western people on earth who had the ability to "reason" and consequently they would inevitably accept Christianity.

The Portuguese merchants who had brought Yajiro to Malacca mentioned that the Japanese were a highly rational people and they therefore recommended to Xavier that proselytizing activities among the Japanese would be far more successful than in India. More notably, Yajiro is said to have affirmed to Xavier that the Japanese were the people who lived only according to "reason."

What exact word did the Japanese Yajiro use to express "reason" in his declaration? Considering what has been mentioned so far, it seems most likely that Yajiro used the word *dōri*. From the context of Yajiro's remarks, Xavier seemed to understand that it was equivalent to "reasoning" in the language of the Society of Jesus.

In letters Xavier subsequently sent to the Society of Jesus headquarters in his homeland, there are repeated expressions regarding, "the rationality of the Japanese" and "the Japanese follow the powers of reason," as a rather obstinate fixed notion.

On the basis of Christian doctrine, the rationality of human beings is the greatest spiritual aspect which the Creator Deus bestows on human beings and shares with them of his own accord.

Accordingly, possessed of reason, human beings receive the blessing of God's grace and are possessed of God's memory in themselves. Even among non-believers whose memory of God has been obstructed by Satan's scheming, when that obstruction is removed and the person's memory of God is restored, the person can become a Christian believer. Due to the fact that the Japanese are endowed with that "rationality," there is a possibility that they might all be converted to Christianity.

However, as the frustration of proselytizing activities during the 90 years of the so-called "Christian Century" (1549-1639) shows, the attempt to convert the Japanese to Christianity on the part of the Jesuits was a complete failure. The Japanese, who were extremely tolerant of the deities of foreign lands as newly arrived "guests" different from their own indigenous deities, and who had repeatedly experienced a peaceful co-existence or "assemblage" of indigenous deities and deities from abroad, eventually persisted in the theory of rejection and exclusion of Christianity's Deus (God).

The reason for this is simple and apparent. It is because God, whom Christians obey as the Creator, is held to be an absolute truth that is singular and of which there is no other, a jealous deity who allows no other deity to be worshiped, and because Christians proclaim this to others. On the other hand, the Japanese had been extremely open to the existence of gods of other religions. It was precisely because of this receptiveness that they could not accept the intolerance of a monotheistic deity which would not allow the veneration of deities other than itself.

The ultimate reason for the failure of the Jesuit missionaries from Xavier onward and those of Roman Catholic orders was that they could not perceive the simple reality that the "rationality" of the Japanese varied in source from the light of wisdom of Deus and that it was the acquired intelligence of the people that had been formed by Japanese history. Xavier's view of Japanese history was that if it was a teaching from China, the Japanese would meekly accept it. That being the case, he



assumed that they should first evangelize the Chinese, then Christian beliefs would be transmitted through the Chinese to the Japanese, and the Japanese would follow along. After a mere two-year stay in Japan, Xavier departed Japan intending to travel to China, but he died en route to the mainland.

After Xavier's departure, Jesuits came to Japan one after another earnestly continuing the propagation of their beliefs. The Japanese showed great interest in and welcomed the culture and products which they brought from southern Europe. Because of that, the latter half of the 16th century is known in Japanese history as the Period of Namban Culture – *namban* referring to the missionaries and merchants from southern Europe – an extremely interesting period imbued with curiosity concerning foreign nations. The number of converts to Christianity gradually increased while the doctrines appealed to the needs of people desirous of equanimity and salvation during the Warring States period (about 1467-1568). Ironically, however, the more accurately Japanese came to comprehend these doctrines, the more apparent the symptoms of rejection became.

Another major cause for this reaction was the absurd assertion regarding the creation of the universe in the doctrine of Christianity, in addition to the fact, as mentioned earlier, that the Japanese tolerance of multiple deities would not allow the intolerance of an exclusive, monotheistic belief. The Japanese possessed a mythology regarding the creation of their homeland, but did not hold one regarding the creation of the universe. The universe was spontaneously generated, and there was absolutely no reason for hypothesizing the existence of a Creator. This intellectual determination was born of the rationalism that the Japanese had developed since the beginning of their intellectual history. It was precisely this unique "reason" of the Japanese, which Xavier saw as the key to the possibility of bringing them to Christianity, that proved to be the greatest obstacle in converting them.

This paradoxical state of affairs was proven once again – and with more dramatic results – 160 years after Xavier's



Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725) refuted the Christian theory developed by Sidotti by using the Japanese sense of rationality

sojourn in Japan, when Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1668-1715) attempted to smuggle himself into Japan.

In 1639 merchant ships from Catholic Portugal were strictly prohibited from calling at Japanese ports. Apprehensive that they might come into contact with Portuguese and Spaniards, Japanese merchants were similarly prohibited from making voyages overseas. Domestically, the only place where Westerners were allowed to enter was Dejima island in Nagasaki harbor, and even there, the only people allowed to stay were Dutch merchants who had absolutely no interest in propagating the Christian faith.

Regardless of such a national seclusion policy taken by Japan, there were not a few Catholic priests who tried to smuggle themselves into Japan. Among them, Sidotti was the only giant whose name was remembered by the latter generations.

Receiving a special order from Pope Clement XI, Sidotti planned to enter Japan. He made preparations for his voyage at Manila, learning from shipwrecked Japanese there the kind of clothes he would need to wear and broken Japanese to the level that he thought he could manage to communicate. In August 1708 he arrived at Yakushima, off the coast of southern Kyushu, under cover of darkness in a boat steered by a Spaniard, but he was immediately discovered and captured, then sent under escort to Nagasaki.

Serving in Edo at that time as an influential advisor to Tokugawa Ienobu (1663-1712), the sixth *shogun*, was the *Shushi-gaku* (Neo-Confucian political thought) scholar Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), viewed as perhaps the greatest intellect of modern times in Japan. Hakuseki employed his high status within the Bakufu and his close ties with the shogun to have Sidotti brought from Nagasaki to Edo, where he questioned the Jesuit over a period of four days – a daring, intellectual adventure for the time.

At the beginning of their encounter, Hakuseki recognized Sidotti's eminence and marvelled at his erudition, especially his knowledge of astronomy and geography, which seemed to Hakuseki to exceed that of any Japanese. However, when he was finally given the opportunity to discuss the vital point of Christianity, Sidotti waxed eloquent on doctrine, but Hakuseki was simply appalled at what to his ears was so superficial and absurd. He could not believe that it was the same person speaking.

The logic of the rationalist Hakuseki was astute and precise. Sidotti claimed that all creation existed because of the existence of a Creator. If that was the case, then there would have to be a being that created the Creator. If Deus were capable of coming into being on his own, then there would be nothing at all unusual about the Japanese traditional concept of the heaven and earth coming into being spontaneously.

Hakuseki's refutation was fundamentally the same as that of the "rational" Japanese people 160 years earlier who found Xavier at a loss for how to answer when they cross-questioned him. Even today, 300 years after Hakuseki's inquiries, we Japanese still often find ourselves inevitably responding to the Christian explanation for the existence of the world with the same logic that Hakuseki did. JTI

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