

The Influence of Religion upon the Environment and upon Concepts of Nature – A Comparison between Christianity and Shinto –

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大澤由実(2007) 環境と自然観に対する宗教の影響 –キリスト教と神道の比較。民族植物学ノオト 2: 2-7。本稿はキリスト教と神道の比較から、環境と自然観に対する宗教の影響について試みたものである。いうまでもなく宗教は社会環境の要因の一つであるが、宗教は社会環境のみならず、自然環境にも影響を与えている。ホワイト(1967)の論文に代表されるように、キリスト教の思想に基づいた西洋の自然観への批評がある一方で、東洋のアニミスティックな信仰や宗教への関心が高まっている。宗教と環境の相互作用について一般的に認められてはいるが、宗教がどう自然界を概念化しているのかという事と、宗教と自然界が互いに影響しているのかという事には違いがある。はじめに、複合社会における神道とキリスト教の類似点、相違点について述べた後に、それぞれの宗教における自然観と、環境への影響について比較考察した。

Introduction

Because religion is a component of the *social* environment, religion and the *natural* environment are often thought of separately, although religion influences both the social and natural environment. For example, Kalland (2000: 324) suggests that ‘religion, which is believed to encourage people to conserve natural resources by giving moral support to certain norms also provides people with the means to circumvent the same norms. It is tempting to suggest that any religion is likely to support values that inhibit overexploitation of natural resources as well as values that facilitate or legitimate such behaviour.’ Similarly, White (1967) suggests that ‘human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny - that is, by religion(1205).’ Even though the interaction between religion and the environment has been generally established, there are differences between religions in how they conceptualise and interact with the natural world. Therefore, this essay will explore the influence of religion upon the environment and upon concepts of nature by focusing on Christianity and Shinto.

Christianity and Shinto as religious institutions in complex societies

Firstly, the background of Christianity and Shinto as religious systems in society should be considered. Though both are associated with complex societies, there are some similarities and differences in their social context.

One of their similarities is their relationship with a centralized political system. As the relationships between politics and religion are discussed frequently, religion would have political functions and also tend to be mixed with political aspects. Both Christianity and Shinto have a history which connects them politically. In the fourth century, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire and has had great influence on European history ever since. There is also the history that Shinto as a state religion led Japan to World War II. According to Earhart (1973),

The major political changes of 1868 favoured Shinto, and from that time until 1945, Shinto was increasingly treated as state religion, which Holtom calls State Shinto. During this period most Shinto shrines and Shinto priests came to be considered state institutions and state officials. Especially as an institution and a social force, *State Shinto* was used to support ultranationalism and militarism before and during World War II. At the end of World War II, the Allied military leaders and many Japanese intellectuals felt that Shinto had become a tool of the ultranationalists and the military rather than a religion of the people.
(27)

Thus, those powers could use religion as a tool or an ideology to control citizens. Furthermore, politics could be apotheosized politics with this ideology being incorporated into a political framework. This relationship between politics and religion can be seen in both histories of Shinto and Christianity.

On the other hand, there are many differences between Shinto and Christianity. One is the existence of the dogma. Needless to say, the Bible is the dogma for Christianity, but Shinto has no dogma, whereas the two books, *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* are fundamental literatures to Shinto. The whole mythology which was blended into all Shinto traditions is contained in the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*. (Hearn, 1966) However, 'for many people, Shinto meant the annual festivals, seasonal celebrations, observances in the home, and veneration of the *Kami* – living within a world blessed by the *Kami* (Earhart, 1973:27).' The lack of a dogma could be one of the reasons why Shinto is not a world religion. This is another difference with Christianity, in consideration that the Bible has played a principal role of in Christian faith and direction.

Another obvious difference between Christianity monotheism and Shinto polytheism is the conception and recognition of deities. This difference seems to have influenced on concepts of nature in both religions. In Shinto, there is an expression *Yaozu yorozu no kami*, which means eight million gods or sacred spirits.

'Kami is the ordinary Japanese word for God. Birds, beasts, plants and trees, seas and mountains and all other things whatsoever which deserve to be dreaded and revered for extraordinary and preeminent powers which they possess, are called *Kami*' (Aston, 1907:5-6). The origin of Shinto is nature and veneration and awe for nature are fundamental to Shinto. Shinto is also an animistic religion, seeing natural objects and creatures having intrinsic active spiritual qualities. 'As seen in Shinto mythology, the *kami* express their sacredness and power through their embodiment in nature. This idea contrasts sharply with Christian traditions, which tend to emphasize the distance between a single God and man and the inferiority of nature to man' (Earhart, 1973: 127).

The concept of nature in the Christian tradition

Since the concept of nature in Christianity seems to depend on the interpretations of the Bible, White and Passmore's views on it should be compared. White (1967) claims in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" that the anthropocentric view of Christianity caused our ecological crisis and blamed the control of nature by Christianity. According to the dualistic view of Christianity on nature and man, 'man and nature are two things, and man is master.' In his opinion, 'both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not' (White, 1967: 1207).

However, he proposes Saint Francis of Assisi as an alternative Christian view. 'Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God creatures. His view of nature and of man rested on a unique sort of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator. He tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation' (White, 1967:1206-7). White seems to have sought the solution of the ecological crisis in religion.

As opposed to White, Passmore (1974) mentions the tradition of *stewardship* about the relationship between nature and Man. He suggests that there is an image that man is not dominator over nature but steward of nature in Christian tradition and man as a steward has responsibility for nature and should look after nature instead of God.

He also attempts to define the concepts of *Conservation* and *Preservation*. According to his definitions, *conservation* is 'the word to cover only the saving of natural resources for later consumption' and *preservation* is 'the attempt to

maintain in their present condition such areas of the earth's surface as do not yet bear the obvious marks of man's handiwork and to protect from the risk of extinction those species of living beings which man has not yet destroyed.' The word *conservation* is the conception paralleled stewardship outlined by Passmore (1974), and *preservation*, which emphasises the relation between man and nature, parallels Greco-Roman tradition.

Horigan (1988) says that civilized Europeans and civilization, being equated with Christianity, were clearly regarded as superior to savages. This interpretation suggests the European concepts of nature when we try to understand their perceptions of wild areas; however, could the Christian concepts of nature and Western or European concepts of nature be regarded as the same? Passmore (1974) suggests that the concepts of both *conservation* and *preservation*, which he defined, existed in Western traditions. Christian and Roman concepts of nature are not paradoxical, and both are simultaneously Western concepts.

The concept of nature in the Shinto tradition

There is a similar problem with respect to the equivalence of Shinto and Japanese concepts of nature. Although indeed Shinto is a Japanese native spiritual belief, Shinto had been influenced by many religions such as Confucianism, religious Taoism and Buddhism. Earhart (1973) says that 'to know Shinto is to know Buddhism as well as Confucianism (123).' According to Yusa (2002), 'native Japanese religious practices acquired the name *Shinto* ("the way of *Kami*") only to distinguish them from *the way of Buddha*, once Buddha was introduced into Japan in the sixth century. Until then, there had obviously been no need to label the indigenous religious practices of Japanese people (19).' Consequently, Shinto and Japanese concepts of nature are not completely the same. As Earhart (1973: 127) suggests, 'one of the major features of Japanese religious life is the way in which man, gods, and nature are closely interrelated on the same plane. The term *gods* can mean *kami*, Buddhist divinities, or even venerated human beings and souls of the dead. *Nature* means not an objective and inert collection of substance but the sacred rhythm of the cosmos as a living unity.'

Watt (1982: 21-22) sees the relation between the human and natural realms as follows:

The tensions present in Western religion between the Creator and the created, and the human and natural realms, are conspicuously absent. In the Shinto view, the natural state of the cosmos is one of harmony in which divine, natural, and human elements are all intimately related. Moreover, human nature is seen as inherently good, and evil is thought

to stem from the individual's contact with external forces or agents that pollute our pure nature and cause us to act in ways disruptive of the primordial harmony.

The relationship between Shinto and groves is a good ethnographical example to explore the relationship between Shinto and nature. In Japan, the existence of sacred groves of Shinto shrines have been looked over again frequently and have been noted recently. Today, there are more than 80,000 shrines in Japan and most of Shinto shrines have groves on the periphery of shrines and both shrines and groves are sacred areas where *kami* stay; likewise there are sacred trees called *Shinboku* in that area too. These groves have been preserved even in the centre of big cities such as Tokyo, and have a significant role in ecology and landscape in surroundings.

It is possible to give various meaning to sacred Shinto groves from a scientific, mental, religious, geographical, or landscape-aspect. Sacred groves are ecologically the origin of indigenous plants and the concentrated groves and are also places where potential natural vegetation clearly exists from vegetation studies. They are scientifically necessary in order to grasp the biological potential capability of nature. In addition, they seem to be the leading role of local landscapes and are home countries of Japanese hearts. (Miyawaki and Itabashi, 2000)

However, there is a fact that many of the sacred trees on Kii Peninsula were felled at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of the national government's shrine-merger policy. (Knight, 2000) The purpose of this policy was the intensification and purification of Shinto as a state religion and industrialization with approximately 50,000 shrines being merged. Due to this action, sacred Shinto groves and shrines were changed into agricultural land and felled with sacred old trees being traded as quality timber. Although it should be emphasised that *State Shinto*, which was reorganized and created by government during the Meiji period (1869-1912), differs from Shinto, it is clear that Shinto religion has had power to influence ecology in both positive and negative ways.

Conclusion

To sum up, some relationships between religion and the environment emerge by comparing Christianity and Shinto. There is always the interaction between religion and the environment and the relations are not one-way. To illustrate it further, both Christianity and Shinto have influence upon people's perceptions of nature and religion giving meanings of nature to people with these meanings depending on religion. While there are a lot of environmental pollution and

destruction, on one hand, there are criticisms to Western society and its concepts of nature which are based on Christian concepts; on the other hand, there are motions which think over Oriental animistic concepts of nature. However, there are facts that there was terrible pollution in the 60's and 70's caused by modern industry and economic growth in Japan. In this sense, Shinto and other Japanese religion is less tolerant of environmental pollution and destruction in Japan. In fact, religion would influence people's perceptions of nature, and it is useful to consider environmental ethics with religion. Religion could act as a brake on environmental destruction because of the function of its ideology; however, it is impossible to seek the solution of environmental destruction by humans only within religion.

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