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Japanese Religions, Inclusivism, and the Global Context

The analysis of various discourses emerging from contemporary Japanese religions shows that the endorsement of religious pluralism (“all religions have equal dignity”) may not go beyond a formal stage, and that the underlying pattern in interreligious communication is rather that of religious inclusivism (“other religions are approximations to the truth and therefore inferior”). This attitude toward the religious ‘other’ may be found in Shintō, Japanese Buddhism, and in new religious movements, and is meaningfully related in many cases to the *nihonjin-ron* and *nihonkyō-ron* discourses and the critique of monotheism. This article also illustrates how the option for religious inclusivism in Japan may be related to the dynamics of globalization in various ways. On the one hand, it counts as a repositioning of ‘native’ religious traditions within a global society characterized by the progressive relativization of religious values, and shows an awareness of the world as a ‘single place.’ On the other hand, it may be closely related to the push toward globalization and the role of religion as a resource for the solution of global problems.

Keywords: Shintō – Japanese Buddhism – new religious movements – inclusivism – pluralism – globalization

Introduction

Common knowledge about religion in Japan tends to emphasize the ideas of harmony and tolerance, which are also largely current in self-representations across the Japanese religious world. While it may be seen that this image of Japanese religions is often based on an ahistorical and factitious view of ‘Japanese spirituality,’ it should also be conceded that there has been in postwar Japan a growing interest in forms of interreligious dialogue. One may think here of organizations such as the Nihon Shūkyō Renmei 日本宗教連盟 (Japanese Association of Religious Organizations); to the activism of the new religious movement Risshō Kōsei-kai’s 立正佼成会 leader Niwano Nikkyō 庭野日敬 (1906-1999) and his contribution to the creation of the Shin-nihon Shūkyō-dantai Rengō-kai 新日本宗教団体連合会

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(Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan) and the World Conference of Religions for Peace; or, again, of other forms of interreligious cooperation as diverse as the much publicized annual Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto 比叡山宗教サミット (Religious Summit at Mt. Hiei), and the low-profile but thorough discussions promoted within the Kyōdan Fuchi Kenkyūsho Konwa-kai 教団付置研究所懇話会 (Forum of Research Institutes Associated with Religious Organizations).¹

Indeed, these activities seem to denote a positive attitude toward the challenges of a religiously plural world society. Moreover, it is easy to observe that the tendency to present one's own tradition as thoroughly committed to the ideal of religious pluralism ("all religions have equal dignity") is not limited to those organizations actually involved in interreligious dialogue. Rather, this seems to be one of the currently dominant forms of self-representation found within the Japanese religious world. However, a closer look at discourses emerging from contemporary Japanese religions shows that the endorsement of the ideal of religious pluralism may not go beyond a formal stage, and that in many cases their attitude toward the religious 'other' might be better characterized as inclusivist ("other religions are approximations to the truth and therefore inferior"). In the following, I will show how this tendency surfaces from within Shintō, Japanese Buddhism, and various new religious movements, and that it may be meaningfully related to the dynamics of globalization, in which pervasive cultural flows and the progressive relativization of values also elicit the reassertion of particularism at the local level.

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1. The Nihon Shūkyō Renmei was founded as early as 1946 and includes the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai 全日本仏教会 (Japan Buddhist Federation), the Kyōha Shintō Rengō-kai 教派神道連合会 (Association of Shintō Sects), the Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shintō Shrines), the Nihon Kirisuto-kyō Rengō-kai 日本キリスト教連合会 (Japan Confederation of Christian Churches), and the aforementioned Shin-nihon Shūkyō-dantai Rengō-kai. In 1970 the leader of Risshō Kōsei-kai was among the founders of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, which convened for the first time in Kyōto in the same year. Later on in 1987 the annual Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto attended by many religious leaders from Japan and other countries was inaugurated at the headquarters of Tendai-shū 天台宗, one of the mainstream denominations of Japanese traditional Buddhism. The Kyōdan Fuchi Kenkyūsho Konwa-kai was established in 2002 to promote deeper and continuous discussions among religions in Japan with focus on selected themes. Originating from the initiative of the research institutes of the Protestant Nihon Kirisuto-kyō Kyōgi-kai 日本キリスト教協議会 (National Christian Council in Japan), two new religious movements (Risshō Kōsei-kai and Konkō-kyō 金光教), and three Japanese Buddhist denominations (Tendai-shū, Jōdo-shū 浄土宗, and Sōtō-shū 曹洞宗), this forum is presently joined by twenty-six religious organizations from different traditions including Shintō 神道. (cf. Dessi 2010a)

Japan's Identity and Shintō Inclusivism

An interesting example of how claims of religious pluralism in Japan may actually conceal an inclusivist approach to other religions and be accompanied by a strong defense of the local culture is offered by Nagoshi Futaranosuke (1923-2007), a right-wing intellectual with close ties to the Yasukuni Shrine (Yasukuni Jinja 靖国神社), one of the symbols of past State Shintō and Japanese imperial ideology:

Japanese people are the most religiously tolerant people (*sekai de mottomo shūkyō ni tai shite kan'yō de ari* 世界で最も宗教に対して寛容であり), as they possess the ability to make possible the cohabitation and harmony of different religions. This is the Japanese character. I do not understand why the Japanese people are involved in the dispute around the Yasukuni Shrine. This shrine is something splendid, because it is devoted to a form of traditional belief that is not to be found anywhere else in the world. Other cultures are losing sight of their traditional beliefs, and, for this reason, senseless disputes on religion continue to arise ... The contemporary world is busy with economic and political summits. Why does the Jinja Honchō not promote a world 'summit of religions' (*shūkyō samitto* 宗教サミット)? Through this assembly of representatives from different forms of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism the question about the origin of religion and belief can be asked, and mutual understanding may be promoted. (Tokkō 2009: 2)

Here, the quest for interreligious dialogue is based not only on the warm evaluation of traditional beliefs focused on the Yasukuni Shrine, but the claim is also made that the religiosity of Japanese people is superior to others in that it is inherently "tolerant" (*kan'yō de ari*).

This characterization of Japanese religiosity may be certainly understood as part of the *nihonjin-ron* 日本人論 "discourse on Japaneseness" discussing and emphasizing Japanese identity. Within this framework, especially since the 1980s attempts to justify the superiority of Japanese culture in religious terms (*nihonkyō-ron* 日本教論) have considerably increased, as exemplified by the writings of intellectuals such as Umehara Takeshi, Saeki Shōichi, Kamata Tōji, Ōhashi Ryōsuke, and Sonoda Minoru. (Shimazono 1995: 5, 10-13; Prohl 2004: 141) In this connection, Inken Prohl (2004: 141) has noted how

The main features of this discourse are the special Japanese 'animism' and 'shamanism' and their potential for the worship of nature, a vision of *koshintō*, and a critique of Western logic that contrasts with Eastern 'spirituality.'

To this discourse is also closely related the polemics against "monotheism" (*isshinkyō* 一神教), which has acquired new strength especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States. The Japanese Christian theologian Kohara Katsuhiro (2005: 221-222, 225) notes how within this framework monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism tend to be

portrayed as inherently exclusivist, dogmatic, aggressive, and responsible for providing the basis to the modern civilization characterized by war and the destruction of the environment. On the other hand, Japanese religiosity is identified with animism and “polytheism” (*tashinkyō* 多神教), positively evaluated for its closeness to nature, tolerance, friendliness, and presented as the solution to the pressing problems afflicting contemporary society. (Kohara 2005: 221-222) Among the supporters of these notions one finds the best seller writer Yōrō Takeshi and the aforementioned Umehara who explicitly affirms that “polytheism is much better than monotheism,” and that humanity should return back to its polytheistic roots by abandoning monotheism. (Kohara 2005: 221-222) This would amount for Umehara to no less than the return to “the worship of nature and the idea of the coexistence of all beings” that have been allegedly preserved in Shintō as a ‘religion of the forest.’ (Prohl 2004; 139)

A similar critical attitude toward monotheism may also be found in institutional Shintō, despite the formal acceptance of the ideal of religious pluralism. As mentioned above, Shintō takes part in the activities of associations promoting interreligious dialogue such as the Nihon Shūkyō Renmei and the Kyōdan Fuchi Kenkyūsho Konwa-kai. Since the inception of the Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto, the top officers of the Jinja Honchō have been among the religious leaders of the Nihon Shūkyō-daihyōsha Kaigi 日本宗教代表者会議 (Japan Conference of Religious Representatives) in charge every year for the organization of the summit. On these occasions, Shintō leaders are apparently concerned to position themselves positively toward other religions. A suitable example is offered by the official greetings delivered by the then president of the Jinja Honchō Hosokawa Morisada 細川護貞 at the tenth anniversary of the Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto held in 1997:

“Religion” is originally characterized by diversity (*tayōna mono de* 多様なもので), and it is impossible to make generalizations about it. In this sense, it is really extremely significant that the representatives of different religions of the world gather here united by the aspiration for world peace, and that continuing the spirit of the Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto of then years ago we become aware of our role as religionists and offer our prayers according to our different traditions ... I am convinced that “religion” has the inherent power to realize world peace. (Hosokawa 1997: 34)

It is apparent that in institutional Shintō this approach to pluralism coexists with the claim of superiority of Shintō over monotheistic religions. In this passage explaining the concept of kami to the international public, the Jinja Honchō makes this point quite clear:

In the case of religions focused on one absolute God (*zettaitekina isshin o tateru shūkyō* 絶対的な一神を立てる宗教), the idea that there is necessarily one absolute truth is dominant. Therefore, whenever a conflict arises, one of the two sides is right, while the other is deemed to be wrong, unjust, and evil. However, in polytheism (*tashinkyō*)

that is based on a plurality of views, it is believed that a perfect and absolute truth does not exist. Accordingly, right and wrong are to be found on both sides. In the case of conflict, both sides are to blame ... Among those who revere a universal truth (*fuben shinri o shinpō suru* 普遍真理を信奉する), in the absence of a shared belief coexistence is not possible. From the standpoint of a plurality of truths (*tagen shinrikan* 多元真理観), however, the truth lies in the variety itself of individual differences. Therefore, coexistence is always possible through mutual compromise. This is a form of harmonious coexistence (*chōwa ni yoru kyōzon* 調和による共存). Shintō is a form of polytheism (*tashinkyō*) and is based on this conception of truth. In its long history Shintō (we may well say in this case, the Japanese people) has accepted Buddhism, Confucianism and ying-yang thought and has intermingled with them. This is because at the root of this process lies the acceptance of a plurality of truths. (Jinja Honchō 2009)

Here, monotheistic religions are characterized as attached to the idea that their own God is the absolute truth, and are therefore seen as inclined to promote intolerance and conflict. Conversely, the polytheistic view of Shintō is presented as the precondition for tolerance and harmony, which is also testified, according to this document, by the past history of religious pluralism in Japan. The implication here is that monotheism is an imperfect form of religion, and that Shintō is both morally superior and more beneficial to society.

It is interesting to notice that in institutional Shintō the critique of monotheism is also meaningfully connected to the invented tradition of Shintō as a 'religion of the forest.' In a self-presentation by the powerful Shintō Kokusai Gakkai 神道国際学会 (International Shintō Foundation), started in 1994 to promote the study and understanding of Shintō worldwide, the critique takes its cue from the distinction between "shallow ecology" (*asai seitai-gaku* 浅い生態学) and "deep ecology" (*fukai seitai-gaku* 深い生態学). Here, "shallow ecology" is presented as the view indebted to monotheistic religions (*isshinkyō no kenchi kara toraete iru* 一神教の見地からとらえている) according to which nature should be subdued and the natural environment manipulated in order to satisfy human needs. In contrast, "deep ecology" is presented as the view, inherent in Asian spirituality and Shintō, which considers nature as a friendly presence and human beings as part of the natural environment. (Shintō Kokusai Gakkai 2011) What emerges is the image of monotheism as culturally responsible for the contemporary ecological crisis and implicitly as an imperfect form of religion.

Sacred Mountains, Buddhism, and Inclusivism

In November 2009 the then Democratic Party of Japan (Minshutō) secretary general Ozawa Ichirō visited Mt. Kōya, the sacred mountain and headquarters of Kōyasan Shingon-shū 高野山真言宗, the major branch of Shingon Buddhism.

On this occasion, he made several controversial statements to the press, in which he blamed Christianity and Islam as “exclusivist” (*haitateki* 排他的) and western societies based on Christian civilization for being in a gridlock, while highly praising Buddhism for its tolerant attitude. (Yomiuri shinbun 2009) These remarks were criticized by many commentators as inappropriate and discriminatory and, inevitably, they caused the prompt reaction of the Christian minority in Japan. In an official letter of protest, the Nihon Kirisuto-kyō Rengō-kai deplored Ozawa’s superficial understanding of Christianity, and the fact that this episode of religious discrimination had taken place with the cooperation of the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai.² his last remark was elicited by the fact that Ozawa had been invited to Mt. Kōya by the head priest of Kōyasan Shingon-shū, Matsunaga Yūkei 松長有慶, who was concurrently serving as president of the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai. Allegedly, Ozawa and his delegation had just listened to a sermon given by Matsunaga when they met the reporters. Thus, one way of interpreting this incident would be to relate Ozawa’s remarks to his complaisance with Matsunaga and Japanese Buddhism – a potential pool of voters – which in turn may have been encouraged by the content of their meeting.

Interestingly enough, this interpretation has been challenged by a representative of another sacred mountain in the Japanese Buddhist panorama, namely, Sugitani Gijun 杉谷義純, formerly chief administrator of Tendai-shū 天台宗, the major branch of Tendai Buddhism based on Mt. Hiei near Kyōto. Sugitani admits that Ozawa’s praise of Buddhism at the cost of criticizing Christianity and Islam is unsolicited and unwelcome, and is eager to specify that any attempt to relate it to the sermon given by Matsunaga to the Democratic Party of Japan’s delegation would be out of place. This is because, Sugitani claims, Matsunaga’s words reflect the same views expressed by the Shingon-shū leader in his address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where the importance of interreligious dialogue and cooperation for the achievement of world peace is emphasized. (Sugitani 2009) From analysis of the speech given by Matsunaga at Davos in January 2010 as representative of the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai and Japanese Buddhism, however, his position does not seem to imply the full acceptance of the challenge of religious pluralism. As a matter of fact, this text consists in the passionate promotion of Buddhism – the pinnacle of eastern culture – as the medicine that “can aptly solve problems of modern society” (*gendai shakai no byōkon ni yūkō ni sayō suru ryōyaku* 現代社会の病根に有効に作用する良薬) such as conflict, poverty, and the destruction of the environment. (Matsunaga 2010: 6) In Matsunaga’s presentation, Buddhism is characterized as a religious system alien to those “monistic values” (*ichigentekina kachikan* 一元的な価値観) that allow a straight distinction between “good and evil” (*zen to aku* 善と悪) and the consequent reverence

2. See Nihon Kirisuto-kyō Rengō-kai (2009). Both organizations join the Nihon Shūkyō Renmei.

for only one side and contempt for the other. (Matsunaga 2010: 8) Again, Matsunaga argues, Buddhism emphasizes the identity of the individual and the whole, and avoids the distinction between subject and object leading to egocentrism. It is apparent here that Matsunaga's approach implicitly relates the shortcomings of modern society to those of civilization based on monotheistic Christianity, with its sharp distinction between human beings and God.³ A more explicit assertion of the same claim may be found in a recent publication by Murakami Yasutoshi 村上保壽, a dai-ajari 大阿闍梨 ("great master") in Kōyasan Shingon-shū, which features a warm recommendation on the cover and a preface by Matsunaga. Here it is made clear that for institutional Kōyasan Shingon-shū the identification between egocentrism or "anthropocentrism" (*ningen-chūshin-shugi* 人間中心主義) and "Christian humanism" (*Kirisutokyōteki hyūmanizumu* キリスト教的ヒューマニズム) may not be a problem (Murakami 2008: 172-173). On the other hand, this critical approach to monotheism may have currency in Shingon Buddhism at large, if we consider remarks such as those of Miyasaka Yūshō 宮坂宥勝 (1921-2011), until 2007 head priest of Shingon-shū Chizan-ha 真言宗智山派 (the second largest branch of Shingon Buddhism), explicitly defining war in Iraq after the terrorist attacks in the United States as a "war between monotheistic religions" (*isshinkyō sensō* 一神教戦争). (Miyasaka 2004)

Based on the discussion above, Sugitani's polemical defense of Matsunaga's endorsement of religious pluralism seems quite problematical. To be sure, we should take into account the fact that Sugitani's comments were published by the religious newspaper *Chūgai nippō* just a few months after the historical visit of the Tendai-shū head priest Handa Kōjun 半田孝淳 to Mt. Kōya, following the invitation by Matsunaga. Moreover, the two Buddhist organizations belong to the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai, and Shingon-shū representatives are involved in the activities of the Nihon Shūkyō-daihyōsha Kaigi, which organizes the interreligious encounters of the Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto. On the occasion of these summits, it is not unusual to hear Sugitani himself or other Tendai-shū leaders strongly emphasizing in their speeches the need to go beyond "the assumption that one's own religion is superior to others" (*jibun no shūkyō nomi shijō no mono to omoi* 自分の宗教のみ至上のものと思ひ). (Nihon Shūkyō-daihyōsha Kaigi 1997: 20) Important though institutional solidarity may be within the Buddhist camp, there are also reasons to argue that in this case solidarity is reinforced by the fact that Sugitani and Matsunaga share similar views about the place Japanese Buddhism should occupy in the global arena. It is not incidental that, according to Sugitani, the war in Iraq and the suffering it causes "cannot be solved by monotheistic religions" (*isshinkyō de kaiketsu dekinai* 一神教で

3. Cf. Matsunaga (2010: 6-7). A similar point has also been highlighted by Elisabetta Porcu in her treatment of self-representations by Japanese Buddhism on the Internet (Porcu 2010).

解決できない) and the selfish prayers of their followers, but only by eastern thought and especially Tendai Buddhism. (Tendai-shū 2003) That such views about other religions may be quite influential within institutional Tendai-shū is also evident from Handa's remarks, according to whom Buddhism especially values "the spirit of tolerance" (*kan'yō no seishin* 寛容の精神), and is "more inclined to forgiveness than other religions" (*yurushiau koto ga hoka no shūkyō yori mo tsuyoi* 許し合うことがほかの宗教よりも強い). (Chūgai nippō 2007)

As the contents of Matsunaga's speech at Davos as representative of the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai suggest, these claims of superiority of Japanese Buddhism over other religions also figure prominently among official statements of this federation. According to the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai,

With the indiscriminate terrorist attack in the United States on September 11 of 2001 and incessant war and conflict among monotheistic Christian and Muslim zealots also happening elsewhere in the world presently, conscientious people have become aware that Buddhism offers something to remedy the tension and contribute to world peace ... while Christians and Muslims tend to adhere to their own God as absolute and almighty ... Buddhists recognize that the Buddha nature is entailed in every sentient being, and are relatively generous toward other religions (Japan Buddhist Federation 2004: vii).

It is evident how in the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai's view of global society, monotheism and western culture tend to polarize and generate violence, while Buddhism, because of its adherence to the teaching of the middle way (Japan Buddhist Federation 2004: 58), is apt to solve conflicts and ultimately save humankind. (Cf. Dessì forthcoming)

Such attitude toward the religious 'other' may also be found within other Buddhist organizations taking part to the Zen-nihon Bukkyō-kai. In Jōdo Shin-shū 浄土真宗 or Shin Buddhism, for example, it is explicitly maintained that the only wisdom available to solve the problems of contemporary society generated by western "humanism" (*hyūmanizumu*) and "anthropocentrism" (*ningen-chūshin-shugi*) is that offered by Buddhism. (Dessì 2006; 2010b: 258) Within another tradition of Japanese Buddhism, Sōtō-shū (the major denomination of Zen Buddhism), the participation to interreligious activities may be accompanied by a similar emphasis on the superiority of Buddhism over other religions. In the words of Itabashi Kōshū 板橋興宗, formerly one of the two supreme spiritual authorities in Sōtō-shū, monotheism with its belief in one absolute God and its clear-cut discrimination between good and evil, and right and wrong, provides the basis to western civilization and its project to dominate nature. (Itabashi 2002) Moreover, Itabashi claims, although today there are many conflicts around the world that appear to spring from ethnic and cultural differences, their ultimate cause lies in the opposition of different "religions that absolutize 'their own God'" (*'waga kami' o zettaishi suru shūkyō* 「わが神」を絶対視する宗教). (Itabashi 2002) In other words, monotheism tends to generate

conflict and is indicated as the ultimate cause of the contemporary world crisis, while eastern thought and its Japanese manifestations such as kami worship and especially Buddhism are implicitly indicated as superior forms of religiosity because of their “inclination to accept diversity” (*tsutsumikomomu shisō* 包み込む思想) and promote “harmony” (*chōwa* 調和). (Itabashi 2002)

New Religious Movements and the Challenge of Pluralism

The ambivalence toward other religions found in Shintō and Buddhism may also be traced in several new religious movements in Japan. Significant similarities with the general approach found in traditional Buddhism may be found, for example, in two large organizations belonging to the Nichiren lineage, Risshō Kōsei-kai and Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, despite their very different background in interreligious matters. As briefly mentioned above, Risshō Kōsei-kai, which among other things also joins the Nihon Shūkyō-daihyōsha Kaigi in the organization of the Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto, has become one of the major players in the interreligious dialogue in postwar Japan especially through the work of its founder Niwano. Within Risshō Kōsei-kai, the involvement in interreligious activities in Japan and at the international level is based on a reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* according to which the “Truth is universal and all religions are manifestations of that truth.” (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2004: 18) However, a certain tendency to present Buddhism as superior to other religions because of its intrinsic tolerance (Kisala 1999: 170-171) and its experiential approach (Niwano 1989: 295, 354) may also be noticed, together with the underlying expectation that in the end all human beings will take refuge in the teaching of the Buddha as expressed in the *Lotus Sūtra*. (Niwano 1982: 154-155) Moreover, in Risshō Kōsei-kai the idea that Buddhism with its idea of interdependence is the right medicine to save the environment and human beings from the dangers of western civilization may also be found.⁴

As for Sōka Gakkai, this new religious movement has attempted in the last few decades to overcome its past history of religious exclusivism – the postwar aggressive *shakubuku* 折伏 (“to break and subdue”) campaign lasted at least until the 1970s – especially through the dynamism of its honorary president Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作, although a substantial lack of dialogue with other religions in Japan is still apparent. Also in this case, it may be seen that the formal pledge to respect all religions (Soka Gakkai International 2010: 17) is accompanied by claims of superiority, such as those depicting (Nichiren) Buddhism and its realization of the interdependence and

4. Niwano (1990: 143). On these themes, cf. Dessì (forthcoming).

unity of all things as the perfect expression of the new “holistic” humanism (Ikeda’s own interpretation of Nichiren Buddhism) that alone can face the pitfalls of modern civilization.⁵

It should be mentioned here that the belief that all religions stem from the same roots, which is often presented as the rationale for interreligious dialogue and the acceptance of religious pluralism, is also found in several new religious movements belonging to the Ōmoto 大本 lineage. Here, it is generally expressed by concepts such as *bankyō dōkon* 万教同根 (“ten thousand creeds, one root”) and *bankyō kiitsu* 万教帰一 (“ten thousand creeds return to the common source”). Within Ōmoto these ideas are accompanied by a considerable effort in establishing a meaningful dialogue with other religions worldwide. It has been shown, however, that the implicit meaning of *bankyō dōkon* was originally that Ōmoto is “the root or head religion, with all others subordinate.” (Stalker 2008: 152) And, despite consistent changes in the postwar period, it is still possible to trace in contemporary Ōmoto a distinctive tendency to position itself on a privileged position based on the authority of the founders’ shamanic charisma. (Young 1989: 49) A similar attitude underlies the approach to religious pluralism found in *Seichō no Ie* 生長の家, a new religious movement related to Ōmoto. Here the idea of *bankyō kiitsu* is implicitly associated with the claim that, while other religions may tend to “fundamentalism” (*genri-shugi* 原理主義) (Taniguchi 2003: 36, 194), *Seichō no Ie* has a privileged access to the truth that all religions refer to a common source. This strategic move toward inclusivism is however more evident in another of these new religious movements, *Sūkyō Mahikari* 崇教真光. As noted by Peter Knecht, the founder Okada Yoshikazu 岡田良一 (1901-1974)

insists that “all religions are basically one, belief is basically one, mankind is basically one, and the earth is originally one,” but adds that the importance of the historical religions lies only in their function as “breaks” to prevent mankind’s total deviation from God’s plan. They will be superseded in due time by the *sūkyō* [“supra-religion”], Mahikari. (Knecht 1995: 332; cf. Cornille 1994)

In the aforementioned Ōmoto lineage a certain inclination to develop a literal version of inclusivism by incorporating figures, concepts, and symbols from other religions may also be seen, which is prominent in another independent new religious movement, *Kōfuku no Kagaku* 幸福の科学, an organization established in the 1980s by Ōkawa Ryūhō 大川隆法. Here, several elements have been adopted from other cultures and religions to shape a system where the central place is occupied by Buddhist ideas concerning the cycle of rebirths and the afterlife, and still others found in folk religion (e.g., spirit possession and guardian spirits). *Kōfuku no Kagaku* presents itself as a standard bearer of religious pluralism:

5. Ikeda (1996: 230; 1997). Cf. Shupe (1991); Kisala (1999: 167-168), and Dessì (forthcoming).

Kōfuku no Kagaku does not promote the view that “only this God is true and all the others are false,” but rather believes that “the various Gods found worldwide manifest the same principle in different ways, and that the truth underlying each religious teaching is ultimately one.” In this sense, we are “invariably tolerant toward all other religions” (*ta no shūkyō ni kanshite ittei no kan'yōsa o motte iru* 他の宗教に関して一定の寛容さを持っている). (Kōfuku no Kagaku 2011)

The same text also explains that the crucial difference between Kōfuku no Kagaku and other religions lies in the former’s “plentitude of information about the spirit world” (*reikai jōhō no hōfusa* 霊界情報の豊富さ). That is to say, while other religions have only partially revealed aspects of the otherworld such as heaven and hell, it is with Kōfuku no Kagaku that “the [multi-]dimensional structure of the otherworld” (*ano yo no jigen kōzō* あの世の次元構造) is finally disclosed. (Kōfuku no Kagaku 2011) As such, this specification already implies that the reach of Kōfuku no Kagaku is deeper than that of other religions. According to founder Ōkawa, our three-dimensional world is the lower part of an onion-like structure where the various dimensions are populated by spirits who progressively perfect themselves through repeated reincarnations on Earth. Among these there are famous figures of the past and illustrious religionists. Up in the ninth dimension Ōkawa locates the seven *dai-nyorai* 大如来 (grand nyorai), among whom one finds Śākyamuni, Jesus Christ, Confucius, and Moses, whose work is to divide and transmit the light of the supreme spiritual being, Eru Kantāre エル・カンターレ. (Ōkawa 1997b: 267-268) Founders and key figures of other major religions are thus incorporated and subsumed under this hierarchical structure, where the dominant position is occupied by Eru Kantāre, also presented as the Eternal Buddha. Ōkawa, who identifies himself with the current (seventh) incarnation of Eru Kantāre (Ōkawa 1997a: 266-267), is therefore thought to dispense its religious teachings from the core of the spirit world, to which other religions have only a minimal (if any) access. Thus, it may be seen how behind Kōfuku no Kagaku’s official support for religious pluralism actually lies an inclusivist approach to other religions, which are seen as partial manifestations of the ultimate truth and are as such incorporated and subsumed within the religious system elaborated by Ōkawa.

Religious Inclusivism in Japan and the Global Context

The aforementioned attitudes by Japanese religions to the challenge of pluralism may certainly reflect traditional views about religious diversity, and be also approached as developments which are internal to each tradition. From the broader perspective of global society, however, these discourses may be understood as responses given by religious institutions to the progressive relativization of religious values. In the postwar period and notably in the last few decades material and cultural exchanges worldwide have dramatically increased due to the new developments in

the fields of economy and technology. Consequently, also the chance to encounter alternative religious worldviews not only as the consequence of missionary activities, but also through forms of informal spirituality and exposure to the modern media has become for an increasing number of people a matter of everyday life experience. Within this global framework, the quest for interreligious dialogue by various religious institutions in Japan may reveal a positive approach to these dynamics and a genuine concern for religious pluralism. The full acceptance of this challenge would correspond to a repositioning of single traditions or organizations in the world religious map as 'true world religions among many other true religions' (cf. Dessì forthcoming). However, it should also be noted that other factors may play a distinctive role here. For example, the participation in international religious events on equal footing with major world religions may serve as an additional source of global legitimation especially for small religious groups and local traditions. In this respect, a certain eagerness of various Japanese new religious movements' leaders to meet (and be photographed with) the pope or the Dalai Lama may be counted as an example.⁶

What emerges from the cases above is however that behind the formal or even superficial acceptance of the ideal of a religiously plural society there is within Japanese religions a significant orientation toward religious inclusivism, through which other religions perceived as potential intruders and competitors in the global arena are downplayed as approximations to the truth and therefore inferior. This idea that one's own religion is closer to the truth and has better qualities than other religions may certainly reveal hegemonic claims, but also a defensive attitude toward global cultural flows and the danger of losing one's own specificity.

Historically speaking, the emphasis on the superiority of Japanese spirituality over other religions and monotheism is related to Meiji-period occidentalist approaches opposing the 'east' to the 'west.' Within this framework, the strong reassertion of traditional values found in the *kokutai* 国体 ("national polity") ideology and in Buddhist modernism, in turn also indebted to the nativism of eighteenth-century *Kokugaku* 国学 (Japanese Learning),⁷ may be interpreted as a globally minded gesture revealing both a defensive strategy (against colonialism and cultural imperialism) and hegemonic claims (Japanese values presented as the cultural core of a newly emerging regional power). In the contemporary setting of accelerated globalization the *nihonjin-ron* ideology may be similarly identified as both a defense from dramatically increasing global cultural flows and the relativization of traditional values, and as an ideology integrating at the cultural level Japan's postwar emergence as a major world economy. (Cf. Shimazono 1995: 1) The intensified attempts to

6. On this point, cf. Cornille (1994: 94). See also Repp (2010).

7. On this point cf., for example, Faure (1995), Sharf (1993), Rambelli (1996), and Ketelaar (1991).

justify the superiority of Japanese culture in religious terms (*nihonkyō-ron*) also through its opposition to monotheism show once again the value of religion as a cultural resource to strongly reassert the local within the global context. From the cases analyzed above it is apparent that religion in Japan is not only available as a useful identity marker, but is also at the forefront in this battle against the relativization of local worldviews and values – which in turn reinforces religious inclusivism.

It is also worth emphasizing here that in the contemporary setting the inclusivist option is – similarly to the option for religious pluralism – increasingly dependent on the global context also on another fundamental level. Namely, this repositioning of Japanese religions does not only entail that information about the religious ‘other’ increasingly circulating in global cultural flows is seriously taken into account (although not necessarily unbiasedly and critically). Rather, it shows the presence of a reflexive awareness of the world as a “single place” in the sense elaborated by Roland Robertson⁸ – which may also find expression in the idea that all religions stem from the same root. Thus, the choice for inclusivism is not something made in isolation, but in relationship to a variety of other religions available in the global arena. And it is made in such a way that the allegedly inherent qualities of the ‘native’ religion (tolerance, holistic approach, etc.) may emerge by contrast.

Finally, there is at least another element in Japanese religious inclusivism that may be significantly related to the global context. In Japan as elsewhere, the impact of global cultural flows and growing expectations to conform to global standards produce a variety of local interpretations. This mutual implication of the global and the local, which has been variously explored by approaches focusing on concepts such as glocalization, hybridization, and creolization (cf., for example, Robertson 1995; Nederveen Pieterse 1994; and Hannerz 1987), may also be seen in the case of Japanese religions. (Dessì forthcoming) The link between inclusivism and glocalization is apparent in *Kōfuku no Kagaku*, where the adaptation of a variety of foreign religious elements is functional to the creation of a hierarchical structure with *Eru Kantāre* and founder Ōkawa at the top. As in the case of modern State Shintō,

8. According to Robertson, “*Globality* – defined in the immediate context as consciousness of the (problem of) the world as a single place ... is not simply a matter of an increasing awareness of the challenge of other cultures but also of what is very misleadingly called the ‘global village’ ... What we also have to acknowledge is that there is clear evidence of an even more direct concern with the theme of globality. Debates are occurring in a number of societies on the extent to which societies should be or become ‘global,’ and the degree to which they should modify their cultures and traditions so as to make the global ‘system’ work more adequately ... In one way or another, civilizations and, more tangibly, societies (even individuals) are being constrained to frame their particular modes, negative or positive, of global involvement” (Robertson 1992: 132).

also the recently invented tradition of Shintō as a 'religion of the forest' may be seen as a glocal form connected to cultural chauvinism, and used by Shintō institutions to reaffirm their moral superiority over non-Japanese religions. Interestingly enough, this emerging concern for the environment (and other issues such as war and economic exploitation) found in contemporary Shintō and in other Japanese religions may be functional to the presentation of the religious tradition as a force and resource for the solution of global problems. And, for this purpose, the promotion of interreligious cooperation as a united front for the salvation of the world may become an additional source of global legitimation.

Conclusion

From the analysis above, it may be seen that the approval of religious pluralism widely seen in the contemporary Japanese religious world may not go in many cases beyond a formal and superficial stage. Other religions, rather than being acknowledged as having equal dignity with the 'native' traditions, tend to be seen as inferior approximations to the truth, thus showing that the underlying pattern in interreligious communication is that of religious inclusivism. This option is found in Shintō and Japanese Buddhism, where it is also shown to be meaningfully related to the *nihonjin-ron* and *nihonkyō-ron* discourses and the critique of monotheism. Moreover, it is also traceable in new religious movements, where it takes a variety of shapes and may not be disconnected from the idea that all religions come from the same roots. Crucially to our discussion, it is possible to see how religious inclusivism in Japan makes sense within the broader perspective of globalization. On the one hand, this option is revelatory of a repositioning of 'native' religious traditions within a global society characterized by the progressive relativization of religious values. As such, it reveals both hegemonic claims and a defensive attitude, through which religion acts as a cultural resource to reassert the specificity of the local within/against the global context. On the other hand, it is apparent that this option is not taken in isolation, but in relationship to a variety of other religions available in the global arena. Moreover, we have also seen that the issue of inclusivism may be closely related to other significant aspects of the globalization process, such as the push toward glocalization and the role of religion as a resource for the solution of global problems.

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