

## Parallel Session B: Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development

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### Difference between Abrahamic and Japanese Religion's Attitude to Nature

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#### **In the Beginning:**

I express my heartfelt condolences for the terrorist attack's victims in the last Friday in Paris, and I hope the criminal group will get arrested as early as possible. Also, I hope the events causing this incident will be solved in a way that is mutually fulfilling. The theme of this parallel session is environmental issues, but I intend to point out in my presentation about the difference of religious culture between East and West from the environmental view point and then analyze the cause of cycle of violence occurring in many parts of the world. The US President Barak Obama said, "Attack on all humanity and universal value we share" to this terror attack. But actually, the terrorist made an objection against "the universal value" supported by Western culture. To search for a solution on this tangled issues, I hope my presentation would be of some help.

Let's start from the discussion about environmental issues. Just a week ago, President Obama wrote his first comment on his Facebook: *"It's always at the front of my mind: We've got to preserve this beautiful planet of ours for our kids and grandkids. And that means taking serious steps to address climate change once and for all. Now, we've made a lot of progress to cut carbon pollution here at home, and we're leading the world to take action as well. But we've got to do more. I hope you'll join me in speaking out on climate change and educating your friends about why this issue is so important."* Given that the US has consistently indicated a negative attitude toward "International CO2 emission control for the prevention of global warming" that EU and Japan have pointed out since a quarter-century ago, and has been as the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter along with China, I think "What is he telling us now?".

However, we support the work undertaken by President Obama as "to do GHG emission control is better than inaction" and request to apply GHG emission control strictly to newly developing countries like India and China, where have been missed so far.

## **1. "Dominum Terrae" Abrahamic Attitude to the Earth:**

Although the common theme in this G20 Interfaith Summit 2015 is "Religion, Harmony and Sustainable Development", we aim to target the sustainable development, replacing "Harmony" by "Environment" in this parallel session. As previously discussed in other parallel sessions, we could interpret "Harmony" as Economical Harmony, Ethnic Harmony and even Military Harmony. From among these "Harmonies", we'll enlighten and deepen the understanding towards "Environmental Harmony" of each other. Especially, as the only Japanese with a Shinto background, the mission imposed on me is to raise awareness that the perspective of the world of the peoples with Abrahamic religious backgrounds who are the majority of this interfaith summit is not enough to really understand the world.

When discussing an environmental problem from a religious perspective, the following language described in "Genesis" Chapter 1, Section 26, which is the common Scripture among Abrahamic peoples such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is frequently used as the basis of argument. *"Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."* About 200 years ago, the modern science-technology civilization blossomed in Europe. Since the majority religion in Europe was Christianity, the words of this "Book of Genesis" have been used as "endorsement" for making the environmental rule by man. This rule has existed until now. That is, "God gives the transcendency over the nature to the human beings. Therefore, it's the will of God that human beings exploit a valuable nature for themselves". This view has been theologically denoted by the Latin words "Dominium terrae."

However, near the end of the 20th century, a question to the justification to human's global environment rule which has been collateralized by a traditional interpretation of the Christianity, has been also raised from a Christianity side. An Australian philosopher, John Passmore, argues that "Two different interpretations are possible for *Dominium terrae*". The first one is "according to a classic interpretation, the human being to whom full powers were entrusted from God reigns on the ground tyrannically". The second one is to take care of the nature, like the way of shepherd.

Human beings living in harmony with the nature is graphically portrayed in the Psalm: 104. Although Paul mentioned "*For the creation waits with eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it, in hope*" (Romans: 8:19-20), two different interpretations are possible for this sentence. We have two possible perspective: "those who hold the nature in subjection is God", or "those who hold the nature in subjection is man". Taking it that "it's human being's responsibility" is the trend in the latest Christianity theology. That is, the human beings have submitted the nature to insubstantiality, and therefore it leads to the logic that "we have responsibility for the nature". However, following the section 21 ("*that the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of decay into the liberty of the glory of the children of God*"), the logic developed as "the day to free the nature with human beings from the servitude to insubstantiality, will come" in "Romans". With this, there are some theologians who argue that "the harmonious coexistence of nature and humans is written in the Bible".

## **2. Different Understandings to the World: Nature>Human>God**

I discussed in my early words that the relationship between God who created us, and the man and the nature that are the creatures in the Abrahamic religion's context. Even if there is a difference whether the man "dominates" or "takes care of" the nature environment, we can discover traits common in that recognizing man as "a special existence", different from the other the creatures. However, if I explained set-theoretically, there is a crucial difference between the Abrahamic religion and the others about the relationship between personal God and the man and the nature. i.e.,

the understanding of African people who is regarded as a common ancestry of all mankind, and the indigenous people of the Americas who descended from Mongoloid anthropologically, not to mention Japanese who has lived in East Asia for a very long time. If I explained using a mathematical model, in the Abrahamic religion, the priority would be "personal God > (greater than) human existence > (greater than) nature". But in case of setting priorities according to the Japanese model, it will show just the opposite (nature > (greater than) human existence > (greater than) personal God).

Let me explain why Japanese view of the nature and the world happened. When we see an Euro centric world map, the Japanese archipelago where I'm living is the "small islands" floating at the East end of Eurasian Continent. On these small islands which just cover 0.0075% of the surface of the earth, 10% of all earthquake, volcanic and eruptive activities on the earth are happening. Aside from this, 26 typhoons come per year, and sometimes the catastrophic tsunami also come. So, the event probability of earthquake and eruption in Japan, is 75,000 times higher than global average. The Japanese made Jomon pottery 15,000 years ago, faster than any other ancient civilizations even with such a severe nature environment. This Jomon civilization which has happened for many years, had a large impact to the view of the world and view of life and death of present Japanese.

"Jomon civilization" did not have the technology of agriculture based on the grand-scale irrigation which was in common in the ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia. According to the common sense of theory of civilization, Jomon civilization has belonged to a hunter-gatherer civilization which is regarded as more primitive. However, the common sense of archaeology that the man cannot stay living in the same place in a hunter-gatherer society was broken down, as Jomon people stayed living in the same colony for over 1500 years, and maintained a large population. Moreover, according to the latest scientific research achievement like pollen archaeology, when the soil which was dragged from the place where there was a forest of chestnut trees surrounding their colonies, was examined, DNA of chestnuts pollen's fossil collected from the soil was nearly the same. This means that Jomon people chose the prolific chestnut tree and planted it. It seems that Jomon people who were the direct ancestor of Japanese, lived a sustainable life, rather than the civilization

which is high environmental load, such as slash-and-burn farming and irrigation agriculture.

The Jomon era which is the prototype of Japanese civilization continued during 12,500 years. After that, when the Babylonian captivity happened in the Middle East, when the philosopher like Socrates and Plato appeared in Greece, when the Saints like Gautama Buddha and Mahabharata appeared in India, and the thinkers like Confucius and Lao-tze appeared in China at the same time, the rice agriculture of wet-field was introduced from Southeast Asian Continent to Japan in the 5th century BC. The local ruling family in each area were integrated gradually, and formed a unified state centering on the present Imperial family. By the introduction of wet-field's rice agriculture, most flatlands became the rice paddy field. Originally, Japan had one of the greatest high rainfall area, and since the moisture-containing wind blowing from the seas surrounding the Japanese archipelago hit the Central Mountain Range which is the backbone of Japan Island, it was possible to maintain these wet fields without constructing Irrigation canal on a broad scale. Rather, acquiring knowledge through their experience, to prevent the potential flooding to lowland caused by heavy rain falling on the mountainside, they took advantage of the water-retaining capacity of forests for flood control without cutting the mountain trees.

Some of you might have visited beautiful historical city Kyoto. Kyoto was an ancient capital for over a thousand years from AD794 to 1868. Many people have lived there continuously and continued to build the wooden houses and huge temples. As you know, after moving the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo, a lapse of 150 years, the mountains surrounding the present Kyoto City where 1.5 million peoples live, are still covered by beautiful green. The stone house doesn't exist in quake-prone Japan, instead, flexible and durable wooden construction is still used. In spite of this long custom, there is not a desert nor bald mountain in Japan. Is there anyone who knows how many percentage of forests exist on Japanese Islands where 125 millions peoples live? 20%, 30%...? For your comparison, here Turkey is 15%. Germany and Poland are 30%. The United States and Canada are 33%. Russia, which is the most vast country in the world and has woodlands of Siberia across the Eurasian continent from east to west, is 48%. Sweden, where is called as a "beautiful country of Scandinavia

blessed with rich natural environment" has 67%. This means two-thirds of area of the whole country is covered by the forests. The Japan's green percentage is 68 %, which is higher than Sweden! Can you imagine? The country which has higher forest area ratio is only Finland where is called "Santa Claus hometown" or "Country of forest and lake". The forest of this country is 74% of the whole country. Moreover, Japan is the most industrial society and highly-populated country than any other countries listed earlier.

There are very few primeval forests in Japan. Almost trees of beautiful mountains have been planted by hand. The mountains surrounding Kyoto which is the ancient capital for over a thousand years, have been always verdant. This shows that the Japanese have planted the trees from Jomon period for over ten thousand years, rather than for a thousand years ago.

### **3. Compare Myths between Ancient Mesopotamia and Japan:**

The relationship between the Japanese and the forest, that I mentioned in the previous chapter, can be understood easily if we compare Japanese myths with the myths of Mesopotamian civilizations. I think most of you know about "The Epic of Gilgamesh" wrote 4,500 years ago. This is the oldest literal text written on the clay tablet by cuneiform. It is the story of Sumerian King, Gilgamesh that's existed in the oldest city-state "Uruk". "Flood myth" which appears in this Epic of Gilgamesh has been introduced to Jewish people through "Babylonian captivity", it became the prototype of the story of Noah's Ark which appears in the Genesis. A huge Ziggurat built by Sumerian has been incorporated into the Genesis, as a story of "The Tower of Babel". That is, the Epic of Gilgamesh had a big impact to "the perspective of the world" of Abrahamic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, through the Old Testament.

Gilgamesh entered to the holy forest protected by Monster Huwawa, with his friend, Enkidu, and cut down Cedars of Lebanon using a bronze ax. And he established the oldest city-state in Mesopotamia. The forest became dry field by irrigation agriculture

civilization, became grassland by pastoral farming civilization, became building material and fuel by urban civilization, and the forest disappeared from the ground gradually from the Middle East. This means that, by cutting the Cedars of Lebanon of thick forest in the Middle East, using a bronze ax, Gilgamesh was acknowledged as the "sacred king" from the people of first city-state in human history. This story is one of types of "culture hero" that has been handed down in many ethnic groups in the world. The culture hero is the story of derivation of special technologies which is handed down as a mythology of ancient people. i.e. "those who mastered how to use the fire", "those who started the agriculture" etc.. In many cases, they have a special appearance like demigod or therianthrope, as Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Huwawa were.

On the other hands, in the oldest national history books named "Chronicles of Japan" have been handed down an interesting mythology as following: In the Divine Kingdom in the heaven, Sun Goddess Amaterasu's brother Susanoo who was feared by deities as a violent person to interfere with "divine rice farming." Someday, he exiled the heaven, and landed to this earthly world along with his son. Susanoo found no tree grows on the mountains. Then, he made cedar from his sideburns, Japanese cypress from chest hair, black pine from the pubic hair, and camphor tree from the eyebrow, he planted these trees to the Japanese mountains and its became to the forests. He also taught the way to use these trees such as like "cedar and camphor tree are good for making the ships" and "Japanese cypress is good for building the Shinto shrine" and "black pine is good for making caskets". He also gave these seeds of trees for people. With this achievement, Susanoo who was feared as a violent person in heaven, has been welcomed by the people of Japan, as the "sacred king" who brought the civilized grace on this earthly world.

The difference of culture hero's behavior between the Middle East and Japan shows the difference between who became the sacred king by cutting down the forest and who became the sacred king by planting trees, is directly connected to the difference between the Abrahamic monotheism and the animistic Shinto world. In the Middle East, put the will of human beings who have dominated the nature, above the nature. To that human beings, the absolute personal God who is transcendent over the nature, blessed and gave the vision to the human beings. Therefore, the concept

of "justice" which is unrelated with the individual circumstances and the nature, go unmentioned.

On the other hand, in Japan, the nature is a-priori principle which is inclusive of the human beings and God, and there is no distinction between right and wrong. The nature exists as it is, and that is transcendent over the human beings and God. Four years and a half ago, unprecedented giant tsunami struck north-east Japan which only comes once every one thousand years. By this tsunami took more than 20,000 people's life and other lives. But any Japanese doesn't regard this crisis as "punishment by God". Because the nature is an unbiased existence which goes beyond the human beings and God. It's the same thing that gazelle which passed before hungry lion's eyes, gets eaten by lion. The gazelle didn't do anything wrong in this scene. Or it doesn't mean that justice of lion prevailed. The fact just exists "the lion ate gazelle, and the gazelle got eaten by the lion".

## **Conclusion:**

The Japanese do not have a lot of interest in defining the concept, such as justice, truth and love, conceived by human beings, though for those who believe Abrahamic religion should not doubt these concepts given by the absolute God. Beyond the human intelligence, "Permanency of life" showing the natural providence inclusive of the divine presence, is to inherit the life from generation to generation, and that's the value. In that sense, environmental sustainability is the most important things from Japanese view point. The Grand Shrine of Ise which is enshrined Sun Goddess Amaterasu who is the ancestor of the Emperor of Japan, is once in 20 years has been rebuilding all of its 125 shrines from ancient time. The construction method is very unique: building a copy of "shrine of completely same shape" next to a current shrine. Then, as soon as "the new shrine" is set, they tear down the "old shrine", and start to build "the new-new shrine" which is also look-alike of its neighbors. The Grand Shrine of Ise repeats this process indefinitely. For this purpose, they inherit the construction method to the next generation as well, to reproduce the shape of ancient buildings. It is the same strategy as creating a duplicate of all the same type in order to grow a cell, once untied the



double helix of DNA and makes a complete copy... For reproducing the Grand Shrine of Ise repeatedly, an enormous amount of Japanese cypress has been always necessary. For this purpose, tree-planting activities in many of mountains have been maintained for over a thousand years.

In the religion of Shinto, which is represented by this Grand Shrine of Ise, does not exist such as something special teachings or scriptures. Simply, we have repeated the ritual in an unbroken line since ancient times. This tradition is unrelated to triggering cycle of violence all over the world today. From Shinto view point, it's highly unlikely to kill others due to the difference of religious doctrine or political principles. I hope all of you who attend this G20 Interfaith Summit to understand the another possibility for coexisting all not only human beings but also all sentient beings in this way.

Thank you very much.