

Summary of the Plenary Session

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In the more-than-half-century history of the “American Studies Summer Seminars” in Japan, there have been only several occasions in which religion was chosen as a discussion topic. Until this year, religion has never been the main theme.

Among the Japanese researchers majoring in American studies, there are only a very few whose field of specialization is religion in the United States. Although most of the Japanese Americanists understand the importance of research in religion, as a matter of fact such research has not been sufficiently conducted. I would like to express my gratitude to Nanzan University, as a Catholic university, for taking the role as the host to the NASSS and making the decision to choose “America and Religions” as the inaugural annual theme.

Religion in the United States has neither been seriously considered in the academic circles nor in the mass media in Japan. Only in recent years, however, did the Japanese researchers and journalists begin to realize how important the religious elements are not only in the domestic society and politics of the United States, especially in the presidential elections, in which the strength of the Christian Right enabled the victory of the Republican Party, but also in the field of diplomacy and foreign policies as were seen in the recent facts that President George W. Bush frequently used religious rhetoric after the 9.11 attacks to justify its ‘war on terrorism’ and the war in Iraq. The United States, the only world super power, to be compared with European states, could be said to be a “religious country” and bear a resemblance to Islamic world.

We could see a special intention of the Executive Committee of the NASSS in that the annual theme of this year, “America and Religions,” specifically uses the plural form, not a singular “religion.” When we think about the religious characters in the United States, one of the remarkable aspects is the historical fact that the United States is the first country that declared the separation of church and state, or the denial of an official state religion so that they would guarantee the variety of religion and at the same time they could secure the national and societal unity under a civil religion beyond the differences of religions or religious sects. This could be applied not only to religious affairs. The trial of the “national unity through maximum tolerance of diversity” per se could be said the essence of what America is.

Taking into consideration the recent trend of the researches in the field of

American studies, above-mentioned aspects could be in other words the problem caused by “multiculturalism and a social unity.” In spite of the plural form of the annual theme, all the three keynote speakers somehow commonly pointed out that we could not catch a whole picture of American religion without taking into consideration a civil religion, that is, the Religion that unites the American society.

In the following, I would like to summarize the three keynote speeches and the comments made by the three Japanese commentators.

Professor Gary Laderman of Emory University talked under the title of “Violence and Religious Life: Politics, Culture, and the Sacred in the United States.” By using the method of the research of history of religions, he made clear the relations between religion, politics, and violence in the history of the United States. As for the definition of religion, he did not limit it to religious organizations like churches, but broadened to all the personal religious or sacred experiences.

Following the history of the United States to the current ‘Cultural Wars’ and the rise of the Religious Right, Professor Laderman clarified how violence and the “sacred politics” have related to each other. According to Laderman, the Religious Right appeared as a reaction to the counter culture, their faith in pre-millennialism, or dispensationalism, was linked with the image of eschatology and they positively affirm the “cosmic violence.”

According to Professor Laderman, a war functions as a “sacred ritual” or a “ritual of regeneration” and has a religious meaning as a sacred community for soldiers.

In his historical analysis of U.S. diplomacy entitled “The Religious Typology of American Foreign Relations,” Professor Andrew J. Rotter of Colgate University also pointed out the fact that religion has not been considered to be as an analytical means and that religions are still intentionally ignored. He insists that more serious attention should be taken to religious aspects especially nowadays. According to Rotter, this fact was revealed not only after the 9.11 attack. Rather he did trace the history as early as from the very beginnings, that is, the days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and made clear the close relations between religions and diplomacy.

Professor Rotter directed his attention to the self-image of the early Americans. Typology means, in our understanding of current American society, to interpret present reality by locating parallel incidents, or ‘types,’ in the Scriptures and reinterpreting the present as the ‘antitype’ of those incidents. This is one method of interpreting the relevance of the Bible to the contemporary world. According to this method, incidents and persons in the age of the Old Testament, that is, churches were interpreted as the fulfillment, or anti-types, of the types shown in the Old Testament.

In the colonial days in Massachusetts, there were controversies between the colonial government and Roger Williams regarding whether their colony should

be thought of as the antitype of Israel, a country of chosen people according to the Old Testament. The American Revolution for the Independence was understood as the antitype of the type of Exodus. This kind of self-interpretation based on typology could be seen in the current American diplomacy.

From President McKinley, who changed the policies based on the Monroe Doctrine and then fought the war against Spain, to President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, most of the Presidents and Secretaries of State were very pious people. It could not be denied that their foreign policies reflected their religious elements of their basic beliefs.

Tracing American diplomatic history in the 20th century, Professor Rotter revealed the fact that the above-mentioned typological thoughts could be of great help in our understanding of the relations between the contour of the world affairs and America's positions. Some of the examples of the types he mentioned were "the Israelites as God's people," "Noah's Flood," "Exodus," and "Sodom and Gomorrah." The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the great air raids in Tokyo were justified by the typology based on the types of Gomorrah. These were understood as moral acts to cleanse the enemy of sin and their destructions were justified as the fulfillment of destiny. This tendency was especially remarkable in the Cold War era. The war against communism was sometimes called the Crusade, that is, the self-understanding, or the antitype of the United States in the Cold War era.

According to Reinhold Niebhur, a theologian in the Cold War era, not only the enemies of the United States, but also the United States themselves were sinful. Since none of them could erase their evils, he rejected the introduction of morality as justifications for American diplomacy. There are two traditions in the American politics and religion. The one is the tradition of absolutization of self, and the other is a critical understanding of self. The former is stronger in recent years.

The title of the keynote speech by Professor Hortense J. Spillers of Vanderbilt University was "Martin Luther King, Jr. and American Civil Religion." She gave a general view of the antagonism between the conservatives and the liberals in the history of American Christianity, and pointed out the fact that there were the same conflicts in the tradition of the American civil religion.

Professor Spillers paid her special attention to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, in which, according to her, Dr. King and Southern liberal churches played a role as a bridge between secular social reformers who tended to put some distance from religious affairs and the reform-minded Christian activists King represented.

Liberal churches removed the walls between the secular and religious worlds, that is, the boundaries separating the streets and the churches. They took the role of mediators between believers and non-believers, atheists, and agnostics. The liberal church represented by King was "a living material example of American 'civil religion'." The nonviolent social change advocated by King had its origins

in the church, and then provided impetus to various social movements.

Then three Japanese commentators made their following comments respectively.

Professor Morimoto Anri of International Christian University in Tokyo understood that a theme common to the three keynote speeches was violence, but he didn't think that their arguments on the relationship between violence and religions were sufficient.

As a theologian, Professor Morimoto raised a critical question, that is, whether there is such a thing as good violence or a just war. As far as the violence against animals and plants, is the very basis for the existence of the human beings, a world without violence would be unimaginable.

Dr. King rejected any argument justifying the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For even the best purpose couldn't justify evil means. Since the War against Spain in 1898, the United States has justified their wars by apocalyptic Messianism. America's wars were/are the ones against the cosmic evils, and connected with the sense of sacrifice and mission.

President Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address asked the meaning of deaths of the soldiers killed in the Civil War in terms of the relationship with God. The answer wouldn't be given without having the relationship with God, the transcendental relationship beyond the rational world.

The second commentator, Professor Aruga Natsuki, acknowledged the fact that Japanese Americanists had a tendency to avoid religious elements although they did know its indispensability in order to understand the society and history of the United States. The first reason is Japanese people are generally non-religious, and secondly there are only very few mentions of religions in the textbooks of American history, especially narratives after the Civil War. She suggests that one reason even the American historical researches tend to ignore the religious aspect is that the professional historians received more scientific educations and their personal faiths are more non-religious than the ordinary U.S. citizens. It could be said, as she suggests, there is the general lack of interest in religion in the academic community.

Aruga said that all the three keynote speakers talked about the relations between religion and politics in the United States or the history in which politicians utilized religions. Additionally, all of them showed a common interest in the American civil religion or "religious nationalism."

The American civil religion has expanded its sphere so that it would be able to include more various people and welcome more people whoever would accept the creeds of the American civil religion. While she recognized that there were effective top-down approaches by the Presidents; Professor Aruga put her more emphasis on the expansion of the American civil religion by the from-below efforts. For instance, recent demonstrators against an immigration law were waving the Stars and Stripes flag. Another example is that advocates for the equal rights of both sexes keep their faith in God while they reject Christianity

and the Bible. It could be said that Professor Aruga's arguments are in a sense almost the same as the American civil religion *per se*. She raised a very important question whether it is possible for the future American civil religion to maintain its existence without Biblical god.

The last commentator, Professor Ohsawa Masachi talked about the uniqueness of violence in the American religions, and paid his special attention to the originality which he thought derived from Protestantism. Among other things, he focused on the relationship between the individual citizens and the canonized book, that is, the Bible. In Protestantism, according to Professor Ohsawa, authority to interpret the Bible is given over to each individual. In this sense Protestantism does not recognize any religious authority.

Another question he raised is how to interpret the "paradoxical" duality of religiosity and secularity. He pointed to the fact that multiculturalism puts its own bases on secularity while its structure is the same as that of religious faiths. Therefore, it could be said that although "there is no comprehensive universal truth such as religious truth from God," multiculturalists tend to think that their own understandings are universally true.

In the opposite position to the multiculturalists are the fundamentalists. But in the point of believing in the existence of just one truth, they resemble multiculturalists, and these two groups are very dominant in the recent American society. There is a kind of interdependency between the two groups. Multiculturalists believe that diverse life styles can coexist peacefully. Why, he asked, could they so optimistically believe in the coexistence of diverse cultures?

Professor Ohsawa understood that a special function a professional mourner or canned laughter in a TV entertainment program has is to enable watchers to share "ironical commitment." By ironically committing to them, people make it possible for Multiculturalism and Fundamentalism to be materialized.

To summarize the discussions, although what the three American keynote speakers chose as their own themes were different, as the three Japanese commentators pointed out, all the three keynote speakers commonly picked up the American civil religion. Two of them mentioned the Cultural Wars, or the conflicts between the Religious Right, or the Christian fundamentalists, and multiculturalists. Is it possible to tolerate diversity as much as possible and at the same time to secure a societal and national unity? Is multiculturalism a universal truth? How about the future of a core idea for a unity of American society and nation?

By making religions the theme, it could be said that this plenary session has considerably succeeded in clarifying the most important task the current U.S. society is confronted with.