

WHAT IS RELIGION?

— A Panel Discussion —

In January, 1961, a panel discussion on the subject, "What is Religion?" was sponsored by the National Broadcasting Corporation over its second network. Participating in the program were Dr. Hideo Kishimoto, Librarian and Head of the Department of Religious Studies at Tokyo University, who acted as chairman, Dr. Kazō Kitamori, Professor of Systematic Theology at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, Dr. Fumio Masutani, Professor of Oriental Thought at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and Dr. Sokyō Ono, Professor of Shinto at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo.

Kishimoto — Since we have many religions, the answer given by each religion to the question, "What is religion?" may vary according to their respective standpoints. It is in order to get as diverse a picture as possible that we have invited representatives of Christianity, Buddhism, and Shinto to participate in this discussion.

In dealing with this question Japanese scholars thus far have tended to borrow ideas from Western colleagues. However, Western scholars tend to view religion solely from the standpoint of Christianity, so it may well be asked if their concept of religion fits Eastern religions.

Kitamori — Quite right. However, the problem becomes much more complicated in the case of an oriental like myself who believes in Christianity, as to whether he can and does accept these ideas of Western scholars.

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Masutani — Dr. Kishimoto, will you please give us the essential points of your definition of religion which you gave last year at the International Congress for the History of Religion at Marburg, Germany?

Kishimoto — My definition is from the standpoint of the science of religion. For the sake of research it is a kind of provisional statement to enable us to select specifically religious phenomena out of the vast multitude of cultural phenomena. It has, therefore, the character of a working hypothesis. From this standpoint, we deal with religious phenomena as they are expressed in human behavior, and questions such as, Is there a God? are excluded for the time being as irrelevant.

With this reservation in mind, I define religion as follows:

“Religion is a kind of cultural phenomena centered around such activities of man as are generally believed to give ultimate meaning to life and to bring ultimate solutions to human problems.”

To this the following may be added:

“Many religions have an idea of God or of the Holy.”

This definition refers to religious phenomena only in so far as they fall within the scope of human behavior. It does not deal with the problem of the objects of faith as such, which belong to the theology of the respective religions.

In my opinion the function of religion in human life consists in giving ultimate meaning or an ideal, and in bringing about an ultimate, not a provisional, solution of

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human problems, if people have any. Religion is a cultural phenomenon which is believed to possess these characteristics. Even if a religious system does not offer a really effective solution, so long as it is believed to do so, it may still be called a religion. The point in this definition that aroused the most objections at Marburg was that the definition did not contain any idea of a personal absolute.

Masutani — From the standpoint of Buddhists that does not constitute a serious problem at all. The concept of a personal absolute is of secondary importance. It would be illuminating to know how Christians react to it.

Kitamori — I personally can approve of this definition, at least in its main point. However, the problem of transcendence still remains. According to how this treated, the Christian understanding of religion may or may not contradict the above definition.

Frankly speaking, I am somewhat sceptical about the traditional Western idea of transcendence. In the West transcendence has usually been conceived of only as being above man, as is seen in such phrases as "God, who is in Heaven." However, transcendence need not necessarily be understood solely in this way. It may also be understood as under or within man, as lying at the root of human existence. I believe this is what is really meant in the Bible. To inquire concerning the ground of one's being does not mean to be dehumanized. It does not mean looking away from human existence, but facing it or penetrating into it.

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I think that when we penetrate human existence, we break through it and encounter God. In other words penetrating human existence is transcending it to God. It means that man becomes aware of something in the very ground of his being which "transcends" himself. Man can be thoroughly understood only when he thus comes into touch with "transcendence" at the root of his existence. I would suggest that such a conception of transcendence does not necessarily contradict man's being thoroughly himself.

Kishimoto — Your view seems to have some similarities to mine, in so far as it is centered in the function of religion in human life, rather than dealing with such questions as to whether God exists.

Kitamori — That's right. What you mean by "ultimate" corresponds to "thoroughly penetrating" in my interpretation.

Kishimoto — Of course this approach leaves untouched the question of the nature of what man encounters when he has reached the extreme limit of his being. I think this was what people were concerned about at Marburg. My contention is that it may be conceived differently in different religions. As a matter of fact, however, the West has maintained that a personal Being is indispensable in religion.

Kitamori — I believe that in dealing with the problem of religion the personal absolute must be parenthesized for the time being. Before discussing this point we must rather

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consider if man is able to find an ultimate solution to his problems and if something transcendent must come into play in order to bring about such a solution. This is, so to speak, the first step. Only in the second step do we have to determine whether this transcendent something is personal or not.

Masutani — Both Dr. Kishimoto's and Dr. Kitamori's definitions seem to be influenced by the traditional Eastern or Buddhist way of thinking. Dr. Kishimoto's approach presupposes Eastern humanism in which the so-called transcendence has only a secondary importance. As for Dr. Kitamori's approach, it seems to be quite unique among Japanese Christians. Anyway, it is very suggestive, when defining religion, to see how very liable people are to be determined by their respective traditional ways of thinking.

Kishimoto — Dr. Kitamori's interpretation of God is far more refined than that of ordinary Christians; and it may, therefore, be readily accepted also by modern people. In this connection we should take the Shinto concept of the divine into account, because it is surely quite different in character. In particular we have to consider whether it is appropriate to give it a secondary place, as is done in my definition.

Ono — The basic principle of Shinto is sincerity (*makoto*). This applies also to the relation between the kami and man. In other words, Shinto must be viewed as a realization of

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this principle of sincerity. In Shinto we speak of a union of kami and man". It is evident, therefore, that the Shinto concept of deity is different from the Christian idea of a personal absolute. According to the Shinto conception, man has in himself the sincerity which makes it possible for him to be united with the kami, and the kami have the sincerity which enable them to be accepted by man. This idea of union is quite characteristic of Shinto in contrast with other religions.

Kishimoto — Prof. Masutani, would you explain how personal transcendence or the absolute is to be treated from the Buddhist point of view?

Masutani — As the history of Buddhism tells us, Sakya-muni Buddha or Amida Buddha, for example, have come to be pictured as being in something like a state of transcendence to which we cannot arrive through our own practice. But it may not be suitable to use the term "transcendence" here, because the fundamental principle of Buddhism is still maintained even in this case. However, I think that Buddhism as a homo-centric religion can be realized coincidentally with our own practice, on the one hand, and as an offering from the Buddha, on the other, that is, as an encounter.

Ono — This seems to show that Dr. Masutani is under the influence of the Christian way of thinking.

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Kitamori — It is now quite in vogue among Christians to view the God-man relation in terms of an encounter. An encounter, however, presupposes an opposite, no matter how this is to be defined. For obviously there can be no encounter when one is alone.

Kishimoto — As I have already said, the view of religion in terms of an encounter seems to be quite common. But there may be different nuances according to which side in the encounter is given primary importance, man or the Other. Both modern Christianity and Buddhism show the same trait in so far as they put the emphasis on the side of man. In both cases man has the initiative to seek and to find what is beyond,

Masutani — This may be a symptom that both traditions are coming nearer together.

Kishimoto — The question now is whether this way of thinking is compatible with Shinto also. Shinto has many kami. Some of them appear in mythology, while others are distinguished historical persons who are deified and worshipped in various shrines. Dr. Ono, might it not be possible to regard these Shinto kami as symbols of truth which are to be found by man?

Ono — The term symbol may be a little doubtful, not only in the case of Shinto but in the case of any other religion. The historian of religion who pretends to be nothing but a

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scientific observer may call these kami symbols. They are, however, objects of worship and, therefore, must be regarded as such, that is, connected with sincerity (*makoto*).

Kishimoto — I think that the Shinto kami are of such a character that the problem of their existence does not much matter. Actually in the long history of Shinto there has been no discussion of this point. The thing of primary importance in Shinto is rather the relation between man and the kami, which finds its expression in rites, acts of worship, or the experience of union. It is in this relationship only that the kami have their function. If this interpretation of Shinto is correct, it may be in line with the opinions of both Dr. Kitamori and Dr. Masutani.

Kitamori — I agree with you.

Kishimoto — If so, can I conclude that my definition may be applied to these religions so long as they fall within the realm of human behavior?

Ono — We must not forget that the definition of such a thing as religion has a peculiar difficulty unknown in the field of natural science. In natural science a theory may be corrected on the ground of new evidence. In the field of human behavioral sciences, however, this is not the case. By its very nature a definition of religion cannot include all possible cases, and the definition of Dr. Kishimoto is no exception. I think this is why he called it working hypothesis.

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Now that we have so far discussed the problem of religion from an objective standpoint, may it not be helpful to let the representatives of each religion speak about their understanding of religion?

Kishimoto — Very well. May I ask the participants to state their own views about the essence of their respective religious systems?

Ono — Shinto may be called a national religion in the sense that its kami can be, and in fact are worshipped only by Japanese. They cannot be worshipped by other people in other countries. As I said before, the basic principle of the Shinto faith is *sincerity* in which the kami and man have encounter. To establish a good life and a good society based on this principle and to realize this principle of *sincerity* by revering deities: this, I believe, is the essence of religion according to the Shinto understanding.

Kitamori — Christianity, as I understand it, is a religion in which man, in trying to get to the ground of his being and by being thoroughly himself, encounters something transcendent. Here one point needs further elucidation. This formulation might give the impression that man is capable of searching and finding something transcendent. According to the Christian conception, however, it is not man's own power but the Other's power which enables him to get to the ground of his being. This is what is meant by the Christian doctrine of Love and Grace.

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Masutani — The fundamental motive of Buddhism is to grasp the essential structure of being and to complete human personality in accordance with this structure. In Buddhist terminology it is called, “becoming Buddha” (*jōbutsu*).

At the time when Buddhism spread among the masses this process of perfecting human personality came to be called the “Bodhisattva Way,” and it acquired the emotional element of belief. In spite of the differences in method applied by various schools, however, the basic character of Buddhism remains unchanged. It consists in achieving peace of mind in accordance with the recognized structure or law of nature.

Kishimoto — Thus far we have tried to analyze religion, and I hope that this discussion has made some contribution to the understanding of what religion is like. Next, I should like to concentrate our attention on the outward activities of religion, in the hope that this may give us some additional insights into its nature. Let us take the problem of peace first and consider the reason why it is so often brought into connection with religion.

Kitamori — The question of why religion is especially relevant to the problem of peace is easily answered from the Christian point of view. It is because Christianity is a religion of reconciliation. However, the more important problem seems to be how to realize peace. In dealing with this Christianity can make a special contribution. On the

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one hand, according to the Christian conception, man does not possess ultimacy, — this being reserved for religion. Therefore, man is not allowed to regard himself as absolute. Wars and the destruction of peace, on the other hand, come from an illegitimate self-absolutization of man. It is imperative, therefore, to recognize that no ideologies, no social systems, no economic institutions, no forms of government are entitled to claim ultimacy for themselves. They are relative in nature. In the recognition of their relativity is the basis for a spirit of tolerance. Christians are in serious error if they think that war is inevitable in order to protect the Christian world.

Kishimoto — This is very suggestive. From the point of view of an historian of religion, however, Islam and Christianity seem to be rather intolerant in comparison with Eastern religions. For instance, how can religious wars connected with Christianity, like the Crusades, be explained?

Kitamori — Properly speaking the cross and military power cannot be brought into any relationship. For it is the meaning of the cross to surrender and sacrifice oneself so that others may live. Military power, on the contrary, lets others bleed for one's own sake. So the cross and military power are incompatible by their very nature. That these two should have been united at all, as in the Crusades, is strange. Christians cannot but apologize for this.

Kishimoto — It may be concluded from such observations that religion and peace are essentially related.

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Masutani — As far as I understand religion from my Buddhist background, religion and the problem of peace are essentially one and the same. In other words, the ultimate goal of religion is to gain peace. As is well known, this goal is designated in Buddhism as nirvana (*nehan*) and quiescence (*jakujō*). Both mean peace, and to be peaceful is regarded as the highest ideal for man. This ideal is common to all Eastern religions, but it is most explicit in Buddhism.

Ono — The Shinto standpoint is not different. It lays great emphasis on peace. The *Nihon Shoki*, for example, tells us that the Emperor Sujin exerted himself to achieve the peace of the state and that he was successful. From this we can see that peace is also the ideal of Shinto. The problem, however, is how to attain to this goal, for in reality there are wars and strife in the human world.

Kishimoto — Summarizing these statements we can say that religion in general has an essential relevancy to the problem of peace. If we become specific and ask how far religion or religionists have to participate in the effort to bring about international peace, there may be differences of opinion. For here other factors than religion come into play, such as negotiations between politicians and scientific experiments in nuclear plants which must be carried out by scientists. In short, the question is: What is left for religionists to do?

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Masutani — This is indeed a crucial point. Although Buddhism aims at peace too, it is not its task to interfere in power politics and to apply other political means. Instead it concentrates its efforts, in the first place, on attaining this goal on a personal level, that is, on the perfection of the individual's personality. I believe this is of the utmost importance in such a time as ours, and this will contribute in the long run to the establishment of peace in the world. It is not proper for Buddhism to urge participation in mass demonstration, etc.

Kitamori — As has been pointed out already, the Christian world is liable to foster a crusade ideology, especially in such a time as the present, when two camps are in conflict. Therefore, Christianity must appeal to its followers to dismiss such an ideology. This means that each individual should become a person of goodwill who can trust others. For as yet people are inclined to act maliciously and are filled with distrust. Religions have an important contribution to make to the improvement of the individual's personality.

Ono — As a Shintoist I am in complete agreement with the opinion that religion should never again support any war. Actually, however, the problem is not so easy to solve. For if religions do not have influence enough to persuade their opponents, it would be of little avail for them to propagate peace only with talk, because they would at last inevitably become involved in conflict.

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Kishimoto — It seems to me quite important that religions should plead for peace even if it may be in speech only. For should they stop doing so, there is a danger of the revival of the crusade ideology. Last year I had a chance to talk about this point with Prof. Tillich, the famous Christian theologian who visited Japan then. He assigned to religion the role of an earnest critic, so far as the problem of peace was concerned. He said that since our world has become so differentiated, it is not appropriate for religion to interfere in politics or science. Instead it is the task of religion to criticize with the welfare of all mankind in view.

Masutani — I think we should not underestimate the power of speech. Take, for example, the Pure Land School which is representative of Japanese Buddhism and which lays such an emphasis on speech. This may be designated as a Buddhism of speech, because its main practice consists in calling the Buddha's name. To speak rightly is quite an important thing.

Kishimoto — You are right, for it is not altogether easy to say what should be said, and sometimes one must criticize at the risk of one's life. In this sense, speech is not mere speech but action at the same time. Finally, I should like to turn to the problem of the future of religion. What contributions does religion still have to make to society? Is it destined to decline or to prosper?

Kitamori — Obviously life has many levels. Problems on the political level may be solved by an improvement of politics.

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Those on the scientific level may be handled by the development of science and technology. The question is whether there is a special level on which problems can only be solved by religion. Of course, those who believe that science and politics can solve all human problems would see no need for religion. However, if we sincerely reflect upon ourselves, we cannot but see that there are questions in life which can neither be answered by science nor by politics, but solely by religion.

Masutani — I am completely in accord with you. To add my view, this specifically religious level is to be found neither in temples, churches, nor in other institutions. It is to be found rather in the lay life of the common man. In this sense, I would advocate a further secularization of religion. This means that religion must be found also in politics, science, etc. As for the future of the established institutions, it may be pointed out that in the course of history Buddhism has undergone many changes and assumed different forms. Therefore it must transform itself also in the future so as to perform its proper function.

Ono — Generally speaking, spiritual culture must be given more emphasis with the development of science and politics. I do not think it necessary that the extant religions should transform themselves to a high degree. Rather, it is more important that they cooperate more closely with each other, keeping their respective historic characteristics. More effort must be exerted towards this end.

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Kishimoto — In spite of their various forms and different traditions, all religions have one point in common in that they come into existence to meet some urgent need of society. Therefore, if there remain human problems that neither technology, science, politics, nor economics can solve, but only religion, religion will continue to exist. Of course there would be no need for religion in an ideal society. In reality, however, this is not realizable. But this does not mean that the extant religions can be regarded as absolutely valid. As Dr. Masutani has indicated, human problems themselves change with the times. Consequently religion must also acquire new methods of solution and new ideals to correspond to this change.

It is the function of religion in the future to give an ideal to strive after and thus to enable man to live a life worth living. In this sense religion will be indispensable for the true happiness of man, even though it may assume some other forms than it has at present.

Kanji Glossary

jakujiyō 寂靜

jōbutsu 成仏

Kitamori, Kazō 北森嘉藏

Kokugakuin 国学院

makoto 誠

Masutani, Fumio 増谷文雄

nehan 涅槃

Nihon Shoki 日本書紀

Ono, Sokyō 小野祖教