

7<sup>th</sup> December, 2012

The Third and Final Round of the Dialogue for the Future Between  
Japan and the Islamic World

**Understanding of Islam and Co-Existence with Other Religions:**

**Peaceful Dialogue for the next generation**

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1. Islam and “Co-Existence”

It is my great honor and pleasure to be here with you today on this auspicious and splendid occasion of the Third and Final Round of the Dialogue for the Future between Japan and the Islamic World. I also express my deepest gratitude and highest appreciation to all the organizers in Japan and Islamic Countries for their valuable efforts and diligent labors to materialize this meaningful seminar.

In 2002, I participated in the first seminar on the Dialogue between Japan and Islamic World held in Bahrain under the auspices of Bahrain Center for Studies and Research. This first Seminar was a landmark in the history of Dialogue between civilizations, and then we have seen many seminars and symposiums with the same concept of peaceful dialogue and understanding of other religions. It is my great pleasure and honor to come back here again to the Third and Final Round of the Dialogue for the Future between Japan and the Islamic World.

In this paper, I would like to consider what makes co-existence possible between Islam and Japan from the standpoint of comparative religion. By doing so, we can understand anew what hinders co-existence.

At first I'd like to introduce Father Hans Kung, eminent Catholic priest, theologian, and now President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic. He always defines the threefold challenge in this regard:

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.

Our dialogue in the field of "Social and Economic Development and the Harmony of Cultures for the Future Generation" is not completed without the investigation and the comparison of the foundation of the religions as father Kung says. As a specialist on Islamic studies and Comparative religions, I will present my investigation on the Islamic Theology, comparing it with other religions and Japanese thought.

Classical Islamic theology has never consciously taken up the problem of "co-existence" in the contemporary sense of the word. However, Islamic society has been making up the peaceful co-existence through the history.

The Qur'ān shows that Allāh created humankind, and as the representative of God on earth, it shows the right path. It further teaches that humankind is divided into two groups: believers who show gratitude to God, and those who do not believe in God (e.g. 76:3). This shows the existence of two types of people on God-created earth: believers and unbelievers. Furthermore, the Qur'ān indicates that while whether a person becomes a believer is decided by the will of God, unbelievers who do not repent or convert will receive judgment in the afterlife (e.g. 9:79, 90).

“Believers” are not simply those who believe in the “oneness of God,” but refer those who believe in the Qur’ān as the word of God as revealed to the prophet Muḥammad who is the seal of the prophets. Even if one believes in the uniqueness of God, if he or she does not accept that Muḥammad is the final prophet or that the Qur’ān is the word of God, then he or she is an unbeliever. Christians and Jews, even as “People of the Book,” are considered unbelievers in the same way as Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Hindus, and Buddhists. In the teachings of Islam, Muslims are the only ones who have the privilege of receiving eternal bliss from God; believers of other faiths are the failures on earth.

While Islam teaches that all of humanity is absolutely equal before the transcendent God, and everyone is born a Muslim, in practice there is clear distinction between those who hold the faith and those who do not. In other words, under the teachings of Islam, believers and unbelievers are unequal in the first place before God. Therefore, “humanity” can refer only to Muslims.

If the contemporary idea of “co-existence” means believers of various religions living in the same community based on equal rights and obligations, extending this idea to the co-existence of believers and unbelievers who are unequal before God in Islam, could violate the fundamental principle of Islam.

For a long period from its beginning until recent times, the “pact of protection” implemented in the Islamic world toward Jews and Christians had been relatively effective because it was a structure for co-existence based on the recognition of the superiority of Islam and acceptance of control by Islam. It was not a social structure based on the idea of “equal rights and obligations.” Judgment is divided over whether the protected peoples under such a social system were forced to make painful choices as second-class citizens. But it is clear that in a society ruled by a powerful handful, even Muslims were obliged to live as oppressed subjects no different from protected citizens.

Needless to say, Islam is not the only religious regime that divides people into “believers” and “unbelievers” and treats them in a discriminatory manner. So do Jews, who believe firmly in God’s Elect, and Christians, who are convinced that only those who believe in Jesus as the savior Christ can enter the kingdom of God. Furthermore, since Christianity was decreed the only official religion of the Roman Empire in 392 CE by Emperor Theodosius I, as a political system it has employed policies that discriminated against and removed believers of different faiths. The consistency of Christianity with political and social systems over a span of 1600 years deeply influences Europe even today, as seen in its immigration problem.

Therefore, the view that only Islam is apt to avoid co-existence with other believers as problematic should be regarded as prejudice against Islam from the beginning. For any religion, co-existence with believers of other faiths requires recognition of the legitimacy of each other’s religion and respect for them. Furthermore, what is even more important is not to push one’s own opinions on the other person, or judge another person using one’s own criteria. However, such requirement, while easy to state, are extremely difficult to carry out.

## 2. Co-existence in God

The Japanese scholar Tetsutaro Ariga (1899-1977) uses the term “Hayatology,” which concerns the ontology of the Old Testament God, to describe “co-existence with God.” (Ariga’s father, Bunhatiro Ariga (1868-1946) became the third Japanese Muslim in 1990 and was called Ahmad.)

“Hayatology” is a term coined by Ariga from the Hebrew word “hāyāh” (“to be”). It is connected to the name of God, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14, ESV). The God who faced Moses and revealed on his own, “I am who I am” also revealed that “I am with you.” The God Yahweh is with his chosen people Israel through this name and reveals himself through history. Ariga sees this as God’s historical personality revealed to all human

beings. “Hayatology,” or in other words, “co-existence with God,” presents the idea that all creatures can surpass any difference by existing with God. All creatures, by co-existing with God, can transcend differences between persons, between the living and the dead, between nations, between races, between civilizations, and between cultures.

But can an absolute God really “co-exist” with finite creatures? Tariq Ramadan states that “to be with God is to be with human beings.” He explains that this is the original meaning of *tawhīd* (the oneness of God). *tawhīd* is developed along four circles or areas. First, it starts from family relationship. Next, it has a collective aspect that comes from obedience of the “five pillars” of faith, creating a community of faith to which all believers belong. Third, the community of faith becomes *ummah*, the community of faith, emotions, brethren, and fate, tied together by a confession of faith, *shahādah*. All Muslims enter into faith individually, but at the same time bears responsibility as a member of *ummah*. Furthermore, along the fourth dimension, *ummah* means bearing obligation to confess one’s faith (*shahādah*) by standing on the side of justice and human dignity for all Muslims and non-Muslims alike under all kinds of conditions. According to Ramadan, the principle of carrying out justice for all mankind by Muslims is *tawhīd* in practice. It is based on a true understanding of the corporate responsibilities of the Muslim community.

Needless to say, an absolute God cannot co-exist with human beings in the same space. The co-existence possible for mankind may only be “co-existence in God.” However, in terms of faith, the “co-existence of the Creator and creatures” is possible because of the absolute God. In the Qur’ān, God is absolutely distant and yet at the same time “closer to man than his jugular veins” (e.g.50:16). Under such a “really distant, really near” God, the “co-existence of God and man” has a creative meaning and is the ultimate “co-existence” that presses for human decision. In such a coexistence of God and man, elements that prevent co-existence disappear, no matter what problem exists in the difference between human beings.

The three Abrahamic religions, born in the same region, have undergone great changes during their long histories and spread to other parts of the world. However, when one sees the same daily life lived by Christians left in the Middle East region as Muslims, one cannot help but think that here is the origin of the three faiths. Under such a meaning, Islam, the youngest of the three Abrahamic faiths, best maintains the traditions of the “religion of Abraham.” The origins of Judaism and Christianity can be seen to remain even now in Islam.

### 3. Monotheism and Polytheism

Here, I would like to consider the Japanese view of Islam. Some of Japanese scholars insist that in such countries or areas as in Japan, that have high humidity, much rainfall, and abundance of natural blessings, there arose polytheistic religions. The polytheistic religion allow the many animistic godhead in mountains, rivers, sky, sea, ponds, springs, forests, trees, stones and etc. On the contrary, in the hash and dry area as in the Middle Eastern countries which have little rainfall and poor agricultural result, the people had become to believe in the monotheistic God, only one, almighty and strict.

They also insist that the polytheism is in general comprehensive, pluralistic and tolerant as to accept anything and include them into their doctrines or rites. On the other hand, they criticize that the monotheism is exclusive and too intolerant to recognize other gods or other doctrines.

These claims seem to be proper at first sight, but they are wrong in many reason. We cannot overlook the influence of the climate, geology, or regional peculiarity in certain area upon the characteristics of culture. But it is not correct to use the regional climate as the factor that divides the polytheism and the monotheism. It is also problematic to take it for granted that the polytheism is always tolerant and comprehensive, and the monotheism is always intolerant and exclusive.

Indeed Japan has been gifted with nature, with beautiful sceneries caused by the change of four seasons and abundance of the crops, seafood and mountain products. On this view, we could grasp the reason why one of the traditions of polytheism was born in Japan.

However the Middle Eastern area had not been the birthplace of monotheism from the beginning. When Prophet Muḥammad started on his mission to preach Islam to Maccan people, the city of Macca was a center for the polytheism. The days before Islam is called Jāhiliyah, which means the days of ignorance or the days without the knowledge of true God. We can study the historical facts through the Qur'ān and the Hadhīth that people who believed in many gods tried to kill Muḥammad after having mocked him and persecuted him.

The same thing happened to the Israelite prophets, and there are many examples and anecdotes in the Old Testament. They dared to guide their people at any risk whenever their people betrayed the God and violated the divine prescriptions. The vocation to be a prophet is really telling labor which forces the selected man to sacrifice his life.

Whenever or wherever they might be, it is easy for human-being to fall into the polytheism and is rather difficult to keep the belief in one God.

In this world such a difficult work as is called the Monotheistic Revolution was accomplished by the three religions in the line of the same traditions, they are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Therefore, the claim has not full ground that in such a country as Japan which has been gifted with natural abundance the monotheism has not been grown there, or it is not adequate for Japanese people. I explain some of these reasons.

The Japanese polytheism originally accepts to worship a number of gods, as said "there are eight millions gods". It is interesting to know that the style of worship has relationship with the rite of monotheism. For example, the Shinto shrines which seems

to be center of polytheism in general enshrines only one god in each sanctuary, and whereby there are no images or statues of the gods enshrined there. In the Japanese traditional polytheism, people never worship plural gods at a time or they never keep the images or statues of the gods for the rites. It is indeed the polytheism, but it is very peculiar polytheism in the world. We can call it Kathenotheism: shifting monotheism.

The Buddhism that was introduced into Japan A.D. 538 had developed the thought of the “highest Buddha” as the sign of the sun or the universal truth. While there are numerous buddhas in the Mahayana Buddhism, people adorned the Indian Buddha who had created the Buddhism the highest status to be the center of the universe.

In 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Christianity entered Japan by the Jesuit Mission, the missionaries made much use of the thought of this highest Buddha to explain the One God, saying that the Christian God, the heavenly Father, is almost same as the Highest Buddha, Dainichi. Correctly speaking there is big difference between the two concepts of godhead, but this episode shows us the possibility for Japanese of understanding One God.

The Christianity brought by the Jesuit Missionary Francisco de Xabier in 1549, had spread rapidly among the people who had been suffering with the continuous wars at the period of Warring State in Japan. It spread so quickly into even the leading classes in the society as to terrify the feudal rulers. Due to the severe prohibition, the Christianity that had just begun to settle in Japan in a short while did not take root in Japan except the very small area in Nagasaki region where there exists until now some of independent Christians called “Crypto-Christians” Kakure Kirishitan.

Thus in the perspective of history of religion, both the polytheism and monotheism have such various common features that it is very absurd to separate each other and criticize each other.

4. For the future dialogue and peaceful co-existence



From the perspective of history of religion, the historical fact of co-existence among multiple religions, cultures, and peoples under the Abbasid Caliphate was based on the recognition of the supremacy of Islam. However, today, Islamic intellectuals and scholars active around the world should be able to create a horizon for peaceful co-existence between Muslims and followers of other religions, while carrying different standpoints. By doing so, a new world of co-existence would be created, where the question of which religion shall assume supremacy is ignored but, instead, it should be a world of “new co-existence” that respects the dignity, rights, and responsibilities of fellow human beings, in order to rebuild the peaceful co-existence with other religions and civilization.

I will give another example, here. I hope most of you know well about a former archbishop of TODAIJI temple in Nara, his eminence Dr. Morimoto Kosei who is a renowned scholar on Islamic History and translator of al-Muqaddimah by Ibn Khaldun. As a Buddhist Dr. Morimoto has been an important member in this project of promoting the dialogue. He has been respecting Islam and working hard to create the mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence between Japanese and Muslims for many years.

I am sure that our efforts in these 10 years to make up the mutual understanding and dialogue between Japan and Islamic World will continue and will realize the lasting effective collaboration among us in order to improve the world situation for the sake of our next generation both in Japan and Islamic world.

If our efforts of making peaceful dialogue could save the human being, it is the realization of the Gods’ word. I quote here the God’s word in the Holy Qur’an for the future peaceful dialogue.

Who saves the life of even only one man is considered as if to have saved the lives of all human being. (e.g.5:32)

Thank you so much for your kind attendance.