

Religious Education in a Non-Religious Society

— A critique of religious sentiment (*RS*) education —

Fukaya, Jun

<Abstract>

Religious education in Japan could be categorized into three types: denominational education, religious sentiment education, and religious knowledge education. In the 1960s, the Japanese government found it necessary for religious sentiment education to be introduced to public schools, but the aim of this education was to develop of a feeling of reverence in students without teaching the actual essence of religion. The problem with this aim is that religious education without the essence of religion gives students a crooked image of religion. A feature of religious knowledge education is the distance kept from the cultivation of values and ethics. Through religious knowledge education, it is possible to prohibit students from having a lack of religious information and restrain the students' exaggeration of irrational thinking.

Introduction

Since the modern ages, education and religion have kept their distance from each other under the principle of the separation of religion from politics. Generally speaking, prewar Japanese education was "*Kohkoku* Education". This education was based on "*Kokka Shinto*", a kind of new religion in which the "*Tennoh*", as Japanese emperor, is god. (This religion

is absolutely different from traditional Shinto.) From the Japanese government's standpoint, the *Kokka Shinto* is not a religion. It is therefore not easy to avoid the influence of prewar *Kokka Shinto* educational thought in public education today. Some examples of this influence are "The Expected Human Image (1996)", "moral education", and "*Kokoro no Kyoiku* (education of the mind) (2001)". The relationship between education and religion in Japan could be a critical issue because the individual's mind becomes the theme of public education, upon which the government emphasizes the importance of Japanese traditional customs and culture. This paper, as a view of religious education, is intended to investigate the relationship between education and religion in Japan.

1. "Non-Religious" Japanese

Japanese religion is, in general, polytheism, or a "myriad of gods and deities". In a sense, modern Japan has no strict religious principles. In other words, the Japanese have a unique consciousness of religion in which they accept many gods and do not believe in a specific god. The Japanese call themselves "non-religious" even though they openly accept many gods superficially. On the other hand, there are some so-called "atheists" in Japan. Most Japanese do not truly recognize the difference between a non-religious person and an atheist. Apparently the two are different. Generally speaking, atheism has two positions. One position admits the existence of transcendence, as with Spinoza, Fichte, and Kant. The other position radically denies transcendental beings such as materialism. (Nihilism is also a type of atheism.) Surely the general consciousness of religion in Japan cannot easily be compared with the European philosophy of religion. However the Japanese religious mind (with animism and a primitive belief of nature, i.e. gods of mountains, rivers, and trees etc) has

a pantheistic element like that of Spinoza. In this sense, the Japanese religious consciousness would be considered to be atheistic. But the religious behavior of the Japanese has no religious roots in their mind. Because of this, they do not feel any guilt even when they have marriages at Christian churches and perform Buddhist funerals. Therefore, the Japanese are "non-religious" in the sense that there is no practicing of the European concept of religion.

Toshimaro Ama, as a professor of religion, says that most of the Japanese unconsciously belong to some religious position although they think of themselves as non-religious people.¹ Ama uses the term "*Sohsho Shuhkyoh* (formed religion)" to refer to traditional religions that have a founder, a doctrine and a religious body, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. On the other hand, the word "*Shizen Shuhkyoh* (unformed religion)" is defined as animism, a primitive belief of nature and religious customs.² Ama asserts that many non-religious Japanese are really believers of *Shizen Shuhkyoh* because in reality they do accept religious conduct and they do participate in religious customs. But the Japanese "non-religious" attitude could be defined through the following behaviors: their ignorance of religion, their deification of a "charisma" or person who has super powers, their dependence on irrationalism without criticism. Because Japanese non-religiousness has no philosophical background, it is absolutely different from the "common faith" concept of Dewey or the "Seinsgläubigkeit" concept of Bollnow³. The concept of common faith stands on the argument that Christianity, aiming at the inheritance of eternal values and the realization of democracy, is not limited in denomination, race, or social class.⁴ Bollnow's Seinsgläubigkeit is not limited to a specific religion either. It belongs as the necessary precondition for all human life (die notwendige Vorbedingung für alles menschliche Leben).⁵ Truly the concepts of faith by Dewey and Bollnow are not categorized in a

specific religion. They considered this feature of faith as a result of strong struggles of traditional religious minds. This is the point of difference with the Japanese non-religious mind.

According to Ama, the problems of non-religion should be overcome with some "spiritual support", including support from formed religions.⁶ We shall discuss the features of non-religion in detail.

2. What is Non-Religion?

As noted earlier, the Japanese non-religion is distinguished from the European concept of atheism. One reason is that atheism is the antithesis of God in Christianity. On the aspect of animism, non-religion belongs to what Ama refers to as an unformed religion. Another characteristic is the denial of transcendence, as compared with Buddhism sects such as *Johdoshinshuh*. Ama explains about it as follows.

"The Japanese feel that gods live in their daily lives and that gods do not need splendid churches or shrines. It is important to note that such a god's image comes from the Japanese idea of "happiness". This idea of "happiness" means that seeking all day of everyday of all seasons for a normal life is what makes us happiest ("*Shikichohyu-no-jinjoh-nokohfuku*" in Japanese). In this idea gods are limited to the normal life. As a result, the Japanese do not need gods with strong transcendental characters such as those of Christianity or Buddhism (especially *Johdoshinshuh*).⁷

Yanagida uses the words "heibon-shikoh (aim for a mediocre life)" to describe this characteristic of aiming for a normal life. The word "*heibon* (mediocre)" is a key concept of non-religion. The meaning of heibon or

"*futsuh* (normal)" cannot be understood on the surface. The origin of the word is very deeply rooted in the Japanese consciousness. Yanagida says the following in his essay titled "*Heibon and Hibon*".

"The word "heibon" has a long history in our country. In any situation of our history, it was necessary to at least persevere. This became a gathering power, a power which controlled our period."⁸

The expressions of "in our country" and "a gathering power" in this text refer to an aspect of heibon. The concept of heibon is an attitude regarding human relationships, an attitude that does not consist of the "I-You" relationship. In other words, I myself and you yourself are not independent beings in Japanese. Both are melted into ourselves. In short, based on the view of "*heibon*" consciousness, the existence of others cannot be accepted; there are no others, no different people in a community. One of the original Japanese social consciousnesses is the racial consciousness of a farmer. In a farming community (a "*mura*"), having a heibon personality is very important. Difference or uncommonness is to be avoided in the community. Supposedly this tendency would indirectly influence the character of the gods. In short, Japanese people need a heibon character similar to that of a god to deprive the god of his transcendence. As Nakamura says, "the Japanese religious consciousness is based on a *mura* community. Religious behaviors like the season's festivals have a function of providing social stability."⁹ If, for example, a religion had very strong values or ethics, people would refuse it because the religion worked towards the instability of the *mura* community, even if the values and ethics themselves were good. According to Yuasa's analysis, "ancient Japanese Shintoism was originally a religion for a *mura* community. The religion gave an opportunity to assure a feeling of togetherness in ordinary life."¹⁰

So far, we have seen that the Japanese religious consciousness is rooted in the consciousness of a *mura* community which has been supported by the enforcement of being heibon for a long time. Therefore, non-religion is not the negation of a relationship between God and man, nor is it a refusal of religion. Rather, it is a strong group consciousness that has the feature of heibon in human relationships. It is also a "relational consciousness" whose power is able to weaken even a god's transcendence. This relational consciousness brings at least two attitudes towards others who do not belong to the community. These attitudes are attitudes of arrogance or reverence. In the case of arrogance, others are weaker than the people of the community. One example of this is Korean people in Japan. Japanese people have had a prejudice against the Korean people since the beginning of World War II. We have discriminated against them in Japanese society for a long time. In the case of reverence on the other hand, others are stronger than the people of the community. An example of this is the Japanese attitude towards American people. After World War II, when the American military occupied Japan, the military was surprised at the attitudes of the Japanese people. They felt that most Japanese people were gentle and polite to them. Naturally, this was not real politeness or high morality, but more of a kind of flexibility towards the stronger other. One of the features of non-religion is weakness towards a strong person and towards a "charisma". This weakness appears as flexibility through the uncritical acceptance or obedience of the other.

In today's international society, this social behavior is not appropriate. In order to overcome this inappropriateness, we must look more carefully into the Japanese social structure. Normally, Japanese society is characterized as a "*tate-shakai* (a vertical society)."¹¹ It is not easily expected to renew a social structure by shifting to another leader. Therefore, each member of society is free from the heibon consciousness. Additionally,

they have to develop their individual thought in their own way. Here is another example of the relational consciousness: "*seken*". Kinya Abe expresses *seken* best when he says; "*seken* is a small circle of others to which one belongs. The building process of this relationship happens without conscious intention".¹² He also says, "*seken* was originally a part of a view of the cosmos of the Japanese, and it contained signs of nature, such as mountains, rivers, oceans and wind. Later it came to mean the way of human relationships."¹³ According to his expression, it is easy for a person "without conscious intention" to be strongly influenced by the intentions of his circle. In a sense, he could exist in the *seken* because of his lack of principles. That is to say, one of the aspects of non-religion is the dependent individual consciousness that consists of seeking for *heibon* in the *seken*, or in Japanese society.

It was observed in this chapter that non-religion is not a religion in the meaning of a formed religion such as Christianity, or Buddhism, but rather it is a framework of the Japanese's unique social consciousness of *heibon* in *seken*. In today's international society, it is impossible to avoid others from different societies. In this sense, the non-religious society is not ready for a modern international society. There are at least three problems of non-religion. The first problem is a poor knowledge of religions. The second is a weakness for charisma. The third is immature thought, from easy going thought to irrationalism. We must consider new religious education in order to solve these problems.

3. What is Religious Education?

Historically, people received religious education from their community. They unconsciously acquired religious arts, such as religious forms and acts. To use an educational term, religious education has a *hidden*

curriculum in the surroundings of a community. However, such a religious community collapses in a modern industrial society. Therefore, it is very difficult to pass religious traditions to successive generations. One scholar mentions, "religious schools play the most important role in the transference of religious traditions to the present."¹⁴

The meaning of religious education is not easily defined because it is mixed with many elements, such as race, culture, community, and history. In a sense, the meaning of education and the meaning of religious education in Europe were almost the same in the Middle Ages. Later, thinkers and philosophers thought of themes for religious education, such as rational ability by Rousseau or direct calling for emotion by Schleiermacher.¹⁵ It was necessary for religious education to have a new position along with the progress of modern educational systems in Europe. Sugawara, as a researcher of religious education, explains three types of religious education as follows.¹⁶

1. denominational education: to bring up a specific religious faith
2. *religious sentiment (RS)* education: to cultivate a general religious mind
3. religious knowledge education: to teach knowledge about religion

Denominational education, such as that of the Christian mission schools during the Meiji period, belongs to religious sect education, education for the purpose of bringing up a specific faith. The aim of mission schools, as well as Christian churches, is mainly to preach Christianity. In short, the education of a mission school has basically two functions: that of a church and that of a school. However, this double function faces problems in the present.¹⁷ Theoretically, the logic of school education is radically different from that of church education. In reality, Japanese Christian schools have this contradiction. The logic of church

education is not almighty for that of the school. It is necessary for Christian schools to find a new logic.

Secondly, *RS* education aims to develop some religious transcendental feelings, feelings that are not based on any specific religious faith. The Ministry of Education's policy on moral education in the 1960's was to cultivate "*ikei-no-nen* (a feeling of reverence)" for transcendental beings beyond human power. In the following chapter I shall examine this point in more detail.

Thirdly, religious knowledge education is the teaching of the history and doctrines of religions. Its aim is not to bring up a religious faith. This way of teaching is totally objective such as that of other subjects like ethics or history.

4. The Problems of *RS* Education

Let us now look at *RS* education in detail. Kohda refers to the fact that the origin of *RS* education is the US's educational aim for "moral and spiritual values".¹⁸ Once in a while, the Japanese government advocated the necessity of *RS* (*Shyuhkyoh-teki Johsoh*) education. According to a Ministry of Education notification in 1935,

"It is not permitted to have denominational education in a public school, but it is necessary to bring up religious sentimental appreciation in a school for the purpose of cultivating one's character."¹⁹

In the Meiji period, all religious education in schools was prohibited by the 12th instruction (1899). In other words, before the end of World War II, even private schools did not have permission for religious education. However, the government admitted the importance of cultivating people's

minds and their feelings. As a result, *RS* education appeared in public education.

The first working group of the Education Reform Committee had this sentence in their planned outline: "in former education we treated real scientific spirit and religious sentiment very lightly."²⁰ But, in the process of making this plan a law, the words "religious aesthetics" were in fact omitted from the Fundamental Law of Education.

In addition to this, *RS* education was expressed best by the Foundation of the Law of Education commentary in which it says:

"It is probably possible to follow a true religious faith through the objective understanding of the essence of religion. In this way, it is firstly respected in religious education to make preparation for religious faith and support a sprout for religion."²¹

The words "to make preparation for religious faith and support a sprout for religion" have the same meaning as "*RS* education". All forms of education (including public, private, and unformed social education) also have this purpose. On the contrary, "religious education for a specific religion" is regulated and distinguished from *RS* education.²² The government's understanding of religious education, in which religious education is divided as specific or not, is contradictory because religious education in itself has a specific character. This unsuitable understanding of the government is carried out in "*Image of an Expected Person* (1966)".

According to the educational objective of "*Image of an Expected Person*", it is recommended that people have an "*ikei-no-nen* (feeling of reverence)". We can see the Ministry of Education's meaning of "religious aesthetic understanding" at that time in this text from "*Image of an Expected Person*".

"Every religious sentiment comes from a feeling of reverence about the origin of life. We did not make our life by ourselves. The origin of our life was dependent on our parent's lives, other people's lives, other human's lives. Essentially, life is not only physical, but also spiritual. Therefore, real religious sentimental understanding is the feeling of reverence for such an origin of life, and it is something holy. Human dignity and love are based on this understanding and real gratitude and true happiness come from it."²³

Some scholars at the Japanese Academy of Religion claimed that this policy would introduce religious education into the public education system.²⁴ In 1986, the "*ikei-no-nen*" topic was discussed at the Cooperative Congress for the Study and Research of Moral Education (the so-called "8 person committee"). Noboru Murata, a member of this committee, explained the concept of *ikei-no-nen*. "Since ancient times, the Japanese have felt gods amongst all nature, such as mountains, rivers, plants, and trees. After the transmission of Buddhism to Japan, we also felt the existence of Buddhist characteristics amongst nature. This sensibility is the foundation of moral education as the reverence for all life."²⁵ In fact, most of members of the committee were thinking of A. Schweizer's "*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben* (Reverence for Life)" at that time.²⁶ As you know, Karl Bart later criticized Schweizer's idea.²⁷

Bart asserts that life is not only considered an ethical principle, but also a religious one. In short, the concept of life should be discussed on the theme of religion. Contrary to this, Japanese people have no distinct understanding of life from an ethical or religious viewpoint. For example, Murata said that "*ikei-no-nen*" is the foundation of moral education but he had no question about the origin of life or about what man shows reverence towards. Although he used the word "Buddhist", surely he had no idea of

Buddhist education. After all, he did not have any sense of the difference between moral and religious education, at least not in this discussion.

The words "something holy" from "*Image of an Expected Person*" refer to an entity of "*ikei-no-nen*". They are also related with "Numinoese", a term used by R. Otto. According to Otto's definition, "das Heilige (something holy)" is goodness that is impossible to understand using words.²⁸ "Das Heilige" is irrational feeling as compared to religious faith. He describes "tremendum (shivering)" and "majestas (majestic)" as various feelings of Numinoese. He says, "These are original elements of the spirit before religious feelings."²⁹ "Something holy is not understandable, but man can experience it physically."³⁰ Otto shows the importance of a human's feeling towards the existence of an absolute being or god, something that is not difficult to understand from a rational perspective. However, Otto's ideas are strongly supported by Luther's theology.³¹ In short, even the feeling of "Numinose" has a specific religious background. On the other hand, compared with Otto's ideas, the concept of the Image of an Expected Person is very vague and we cannot find any kind of a specific spiritual background.

The point is that *ikei-no-nen* is a core concept of *RS* education. Here we can see how Saki Akio, a scholar of religion and Marxism, described *RS* education.

"In the past, a country emphasized the importance of "*Sake* (Alcoholic)" education. *Sake* has an enormous influence in life so it should therefore be respected in education. But there are many different kinds of *Sake*. When one *Sake* is chosen and another is not, it becomes difficult to keep fairness. One wise governor designed "a feeling of *Sake* education". The purpose of the education was to give the feeling of *Sake* without actually drinking it."³²

We can find some important points from Akio's ironic comments about religious education. The words "*religious sentiment*" are in themselves a sign of ambiguity within the Japanese consideration of religion. Saki shows us this weak point using *Sake* as a metaphor. Truly, from the standpoint of *RS* education, it is possible to keep fairness towards other religions. *RS* education could develop "religious" sensibility in public education. But the approach of *RS* education has a serious problem in keeping fairness. In short, it is necessary to generalize religions by getting rid of their originality. Without studying the doctrines of each religion, religious education would give students a crooked image of religion. The most dangerous effect of *RS* education is that religious education, without the essence of religion, could be learned in a school.

RS education avoids the originality of specific religious thought and dogma.³³ This attitude could lead to ideological education because people could not grow their sense of spirituality in a religion. Without this sense of spirituality, with respect to some concepts, they could not logically distinguish religion from ideology. In reality, the Japanese government dares to maintain ambiguity in the definition of religion. It is useful for the government to introduce some ideological education with religious character. We see a typical example of this in education during World War II. This educational policy is hidden in the current Japanese education system.

5. The Significance of Religious Knowledge Education (A Design of New Religious Education)

RS education, as mentioned, would create a distorted understanding of religion. In my opinion, the aim of new religious education should be to keep some distance from the cultivation of values and ethics. This does not

mean that a learner's spiritual development is not important. The educational aim for the teacher is to recognize both the positive and the negative sides of spiritual growth. However, some problems in public schools have already occurred among teachers in relation to the evaluation of student's minds. Therefore, schools should focus on teaching the knowledge of religion in an absolutely objective way.

There are two reasons to make a proposal of religious knowledge education. The first reason is that religious knowledge education is able to prohibit students from lacking information about religions. A poor understanding about religions could make people prejudiced towards the followers of other religions. Another positive point regarding religious knowledge education is that it could be expected that a person with a specific belief could cultivate his spirit of tolerance towards other beliefs.³⁴

Secondly, religious knowledge education can restrain the exaggerations of irrational thinking. It is a fact that many young people who belonged to the "*Ohmu-Shinrikyoh*" religious cult were "elite" in their schools. They knew a lot of scientific information, but they had no intelligence about religion because they did not have the opportunity to learn about religions. Therefore, their mind was not developed enough to feel the limitations of science. They were not able to understand the importance of logical thinking and the point where of science becomes religion. It is supposed that this lack of knowledge about religions was one of the reasons for their dependence on the irrational and mystical doctrine of the cult.³⁵

The feature of religious knowledge education is to learn "knowledge" as objective information about irrational and mysterious evidence. This knowledge independently exists in itself. Learning about religion is basically different from believing in a religion. It is objectively learning

about a religion's thoughts, its culture or its history. Surely, this is also necessary for denominational education.

However, it is wondered what the difference between knowledge of religion and knowledge which objectively exists in itself is. In reality, religion consists not only of belief, but also other parts of culture that are connected with religious knowledge. It means that learning about culture and learning religious knowledge are the same thing.

Conclusion

It should be considered what the task of religious knowledge education in Japan is. Firstly, we should think of a relationship between denominational education and religious knowledge education. There are some private religious schools where teachers emphasize the development of a student's faith. It seems that learning religion, even in denominational education, is surely important to create a sense of tolerance for other religions. As a result, this tolerance could grow to a sense of global human rights. Secondly, the connection between religious knowledge and refinement should be analyzed. The topic of connected and unconnected relationships between them is important in the philosophical view of education. As Dewey's philosophy states, experience, as a process of learning knowledge, is "reconstructed". In short, Dewey is saying that knowledge education is prepared to build and refine a personality through the learning process. At the same time, the question could be asked about what meaning religion has to me.

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Division of Childhood Education
Seinan Gakuin University