

## Inter-religious Dialogue in *Shūron*, a *Kyōgen* Play

Ken'ichi Maegawa

THERE is an unspoken rule in what is called “the dialogue of religions.” It is that participants do not criticize each other’s religious doctrines. Naturally, doctrines are essential to each religion and they should not be easily criticized by others. In addition, history shows that differences in doctrines have caused serious opposition between people who believe different religions. If we aim to establish cooperation between religions (or religious organizations), it is quite natural to try to avoid mentioning such issues.

As a result, however, many “dialogues of religions” seem to be shallow. The coexistence of people who have different views of the world is supposed to be the most important purpose of the dialogues of religions. If it is so, shouldn’t we discuss such differences themselves as the most important subject? Of course, just making statements to each other does not make for a “dialogue” and appropriate “rules and manners” are required. However, even though all that people do is make statements to each other, if these statements are made open to the public, I think they will possibly enhance many people’s understanding. Participants in a dialogue may not reach an agreement, but the audience can judge the right and wrong of their statements. Moreover, I think that if they continue a dialogue, they will go beyond just making statements to each other. Each of them may be forced to review its own statement if the criticism of the other reveals a flaw in it. While both of them continue to reflect on their own statements in this way, they may understand more profoundly the meaning of their opposition and as a result, they may be able to create a framework for coexistence.

This proposition may be regarded as an impractical one that ignores the intensification of religious conflicts. However, if such hostile religious antagonism exists, there will be no room for dialogue. The true limitation of “the dialogues of religions” lies in the fact that dialogues are only possible between those who are willing to talk with others. Conversely, however, if religious parties have the intention to talk with each other, I think that they should make statements to their heart’s con-

tent. Only then can the dialogues of religions fulfill their role. Nonetheless, it is a well-known fact that such process is quite difficult. Furthermore, when discussing religious doctrines, there is a more fundamental problem which is different from the ones already stated. It is “What do the differences between religious doctrines mean?”<sup>1</sup>

From this point of view, I would like to consider the *kyōgen* play *Shūron* (*Religious Discussion*) in this paper.<sup>2</sup>

The plot of this play is that a priest of Hokke-shū (followers of Nichiren’s doctrine) and a priest of Jōdo-shū (Pure Land Buddhists) happen to meet and as a result of their religious discussion, they reach an agreement somehow. Behind this story is a profound antagonism between both religious sects in Medieval Japan. The doctrine of Jōdo-shū, which has absolute faith in salvation by Buddha Amitāyus (Amida-butsu) was exposed to severe criticism from existing Buddhist sects. Especially, Nichiren, who believed that the chanting of the title of the Lotus Sutra (*daimoku*) is the supreme Buddhist practice, severely criticized Jōdo-shū. In cooperation with other sects, Jōdo-shū cracked down on Nichiren, but as Nichiren-shū expanded its influence, both sects frequently clashed with each other. Particularly, antagonism between Nichiren-shū and Ikkō-shū (Shin Buddhism), which is a sub-sect of Jōdo-shū, led to armed conflicts.<sup>3</sup> Religious discussions between Hokke-shū and Jōdo-shū were frequent, but a discussion at Azuchi, which was held in the 7th year of Tenshō (1579) by the order of Oda Nobunaga, was particularly famous. Complying with the political intent of Oda Nobunaga, it was judged that Hokke-shū lost in this discussion.

Now, I will take this background into account and follow the plot of the *kyōgen* play *Shūron*.

A Hokke-shū priest is on his way back from Minobu, where Kuonji Temple, the main temple of the sect, is located. Meanwhile, a Jōdo-shū priest is coming back from Zenkōji Temple, which is famous for being visited by many believers in Buddha Amitāyus. Before long, they realize that they belong to opposing sects. While the Hokke-shū priest tries to part ways with his companion, the Jōdo-shū priest insists to continue their trip together. They get angry at each other and start an argument on the principles of each other’s religion. Then, they pull out rosaries that are associated with the founders of their sects (Hōnen and Nichiren) and start a skirmish. The Hokke-shū priest pulls himself away from the Jōdo-shū priest and puts up at an inn. Nevertheless, the Jōdo-shū priest purposely stays at the same inn and they start a religious discussion on the condition that the loser will convert to the sect of the winner. However, it becomes apparent that neither of them understands the doctrines

of their sects correctly.<sup>4</sup> They are appalled at each other's argument and fall asleep. When the Jōdo-shū priest wakes up and starts chanting Namu-Amidabutsu (*myōgō*), the Hokke-shū priest begins to chant Namu-Myōhōrengekyō (*daimoku*). When the former starts dancing and chanting Namu-Amidabutsu, the latter also begins dancing and chanting *daimoku*. Before long, they confuse *daimoku* and *myōgō* and remember a passage<sup>5</sup> which says, "It was called Hokke in old days in the Eagle Peak. Now it is called Buddha Amitāyus in the west. And in this world it appears as Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. It is the same person who brought benefits to all the living beings from past to future." They chant it and declare, "This passage tells us that Hokke and Mida are one and the same. From now on, we will call them Myō-Amidabutsu."

The priests find a logic that enables the coexistence of faith in Buddha Amitāyus and faith in the Lotus Sutra and come to reconciliation. In a word, it can be said that the logic used here is the *honji suijaku* theory (emanation theory), which means regarding one thing as *honji* (original sources) and another as *shaku* (secondary emanation). In general, this theory has made it possible for religions to coexist in the East Asian world. The relation between Buddhism and Shinto in Japan is typical, but the same thing can be said about the syncretism of three religions (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) in China. However, the emanation theory, which regards one of the two opposing things as original sources and the other as secondary emanation, does not mean coexistence in a contemporary context. Furthermore, a serious opposition can occur, depending on which of the two things is considered as "original source." For example, Yoshida Kanetomo (1435~1511), a Shinto priest in the Muromachi period, insisted that Japanese god should be considered as original source and buddhas and bodhisattvas as secondary emanation and that Shinto is superior to Buddhism, in contradiction to the general understanding at the time (which regarded buddhas and bodhisattvas as original sources and gods as secondary emanation.)

In *Shūron*, it is shown that the relationship between Buddha Amitāyus, which is worshipped in Jōdo-shū, and the Lotus Sutra (and Bodhisattva Avalokiteśva), which Hokke-shū believes in, is that of original sources and secondary emanation, and both priests accept that. However, this situation is unlikely to happen in reality. From the standpoint of Jōdo-shū, only the total reliance upon the compassion of Buddha Amitāyus enables people in the Latter Days of the Law to attain enlightenment (to be born in the Pure Land after their death), and any other teachings should be dismissed. On the other hand, in the doctrines of Hokke-shū, only Buddha (Shakyamuni), who attained Buddhahood in

the remote past as related in the Lotus Sutra, is the true buddha and any other buddhas are nothing but provisional. Likewise, sutras other than the Lotus Sutra are merely provisional ones until the true sutra is preached. Thus, there is no room for accepting the emanation theory in the arguments of both sects. Even if they accept the theory, their conflicts are not likely to be solved because disagreement still remains between the sects over the capability of the people, an issue which cannot be solved by the emanation theory. Both sects think that the capability of the people of the Latter Days of the Law. However, Jōdo-shū thinks that only because the people's capability is low, an easy practice such as the recitation of *Namu-Amidabutsu* is necessary, while Hokke-shū believes that precisely because their capability is low, they cannot be saved by anything other than the supreme teaching. According to the emanation theory, secondary emanation originates from original sources, but it is not simply reduced to sources and has a unique identity that original sources lacks. (Just like buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest themselves as gods with the particular purpose of benefiting the Japanese people.) Since the choice between Buddha Amitāyus and the Lotus Sutra concerns this unique identity, it is impossible to reconcile them by considering that they are in an emanation relationship.

From the contemporary viewpoint, it is apparent that there is a problem in the emanation theory. For instance, the theory that regards Jesus as the manifestation of some buddha would not be accepted either by Christians or Buddhists.

However, all of these discussions are only made from the viewpoints of religious parties. What does the audience (and the author) think of this *kyōgen* play? What the audience feels and the author tries to show is a resemblance between the Jōdo-shū priest and the Hokke-shū priest. They are very similar in their speech and behavior as well as in the strangeness with which they advocate their respective doctrines. Moreover, the end of the play, though just roughly, shows the possibility of the coexistence of both religions, regardless of differences in their doctrines. Along with the fact that the priests are ignorant of their own doctrines, this ending gives the impression that the opposition between the sects might merely be an emotional one. This play suggests that since they are both sects of Buddhism, they may be able to get along with each other.

This suggestion should not be dismissed as a naive impression of people who are ignorant of religious doctrines. Those who are not devoted to specific religions tend to regard religious doctrines as such. The same is true of the case in which one belonging to a certain religious tradition

looks at another religious tradition. For example, Buddhists assume that since Christianity, Judaism and Islam believe in the same god (Yahweh), they could naturally get along with each other. On the contrary, Christians may not understand how Buddhism could be divided into so many sects.

Of course, it is possible to explain why religious sects advocate different doctrines and what the differences mean. However, the more words are used to explain these issues, the more trivial they are likely to look. In the introduction of the plot of *Shūron*, I mentioned that the priests of either sect do not precisely understand their own doctrines, but it can also be said that the story shows that outsiders cannot understand the arguments based on the sutras at all. Regardless of various criticisms to the theory,<sup>6</sup> “religious pluralism” advocated by John Hick attracts a lot of attention, probably because his idea reflects the feelings of and finds a natural affinity with the general public; that is, people tend to think that, after all, there is no big difference between religions.

Paradoxically speaking, the reason why there is a tendency to avoid direct argument about religious doctrines in the dialogues of religions may be that the more one insists on the uniqueness of one’s religious doctrines, the more likely one’s insistence invokes the impression that it may be not so unique. Emphasizing one’s identity leads to the relativity of the identity.

In *Shūron*, the direct religious discussion is put to an end with the words of the Jōdo-shū priest, “People without learning don’t lose a discussion because they lack reason.” While his words conclude their strange arguments, in which both of them misunderstand the religious doctrines of their own sects, they also advocate the impression of third parties, which is that there is nothing important in their insistences, as I have already stated. However, another interpretation is also possible. Whether they are those without learning or scholars, if people try to simply argue their faith logically, they cannot avoid becoming dogmatic. This is quite natural because faith generally includes a superempirical element.

In this line of thinking, the end of religious discussion does not simply mean the abandonment of efforts to achieve mutual understanding. Though the arguments of the priests in the *Shūron* are poor and comical, they speak their minds and reach a point where they cannot understand each other. It is probably not until they reach this point that the process of reconciliation begins. As I have already mentioned, in *Shūron*, both priests go to sleep after the religious discussion. When they wake up, they start the practices of their own sects. While they are dancing around

in a circle, chanting *myōgō* or *daimoku*, they confuse *myōgō* and *daimoku* and find the logic of coexistence. What should be noted in this process is the fact that the priests sleep in the same inn. From the viewpoint of dramaturgy, this episode may be intended to change scenes, but sleep is also one of the most fundamental demands of humanity and the most vulnerable state. Sharing such an experience means that the priests go back to the most basic level as human beings. After that, it is depicted that they recognize their similarities through carrying out the religious practices of the other's sect, an act that should be the last thing they do. Though it may not be acceptable to generalize and say that this ending shows that people can't understand a faith without practicing it, it is true that some knowledge based on experience is required in order to understand religions.

There is no doubt that *Shūron* makes fun of religious discussions held at the time. However, if that were all that the play offered, it could not have timeless universality. The play seems to show the vision the medieval people had for religious reconciliation (though the medieval view of the world has its limits because reconciliation is eventually based on the emanation theory.) What should be considered in relation to the issue raised at the beginning of this paper is the subtle position of religious doctrines. Differences in religious doctrines may be (and usually is) a decisive issue for the parties concerned, but they sometimes appear to be trivial to third parties. However, the dialogues of "religions" are impossible without arguing them and true reconciliation cannot be achieved. It is not until people say all they have to say and reach the point where they cannot understand each other that they can stand on the same platform as human beings and seek a theory that enables their coexistence. *Shūron* may be too optimistic and full of mockery, but it shows an appropriate model of dialogue.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the problem of religious doctrines in the dialogues of religions, Yukiko Yamanashi states, "Pluralism promoted by 'globality' demands the reconsideration of the position of religious doctrines that are the essence and identity of religions." (Yukiko Yamanashi. "Globalization and Religion" *Religious Studies (Shukyo kenkyu)* 339 (2004): p. 155.) This paper aims to respond to this problem indirectly.

<sup>2</sup> As to *Shūron*, I have used the text that is included in *Kyōgen-shū* Vol. 2 (Edited and annotated by Hiroshi Koyama, *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*, Iwanami Shoten, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> In the first year of Tenbun (1532), the believers of Hokke-shū set fire to Hongan-ji Temple, the head temple of Ikkō-shū, and banished the followers of Ikkō-shū from Kyoto. After that, Hokke-shū was also attacked by priests of Mt. Hiei and suffered serious damage.

<sup>4</sup> In the original text, puns based on the sutras that each priest believes in are shown.

<sup>5</sup> This passage is considered to be written by Hui-si (second patriarch of Chinese Tien-tai school), but it is not found in his writings and it seems to have been created in Japan.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Hiroshi Kanno (“The *Lotus Sūtra* and the Dialogue of Religions.” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* Vol. 16 (2006)), Kanno says, “I think that it is quite difficult for ardent and faithful devotees of any one religion to take a pluralistic stance.” (p. 139)