Modern Japan from the Viewpoint of the Arab World: Modernities in Different Cultures

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During the Golden Week holidays, I was invited to *Modernity and Values in a Changing World*, a two-day international conference from April 30 to May 1, 2012, in Sharjah, one of the seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates, along with professors Katsuhiro Kohara, Samir Abdel Hamid I. Nouh, and Taro Tsukimura of Doshisha University and associate professor Satoru Nakamura of Kobe University. Focusing on the theme of religions and traditional values in modern Japan, this international conference was co-organized by the Prince Abdul Mohsin Bin Jalawi Centre for Islamic Research and Studies (which was established by Sharjah's royal family) and Doshisha University's Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions. I delivered a research presentation titled "Discourse Formation about 'Freedom of Religion' in Modern Japan — Concept of Religion, Shintoism, and the Emperor System." This was my first visit to the Arab region. Although I was on a tight schedule during the two-day stay, I had an ideal opportunity to reflect upon the modern history of Japan.

Seen from above, Dubai, a city home to an international airport, just looked like New York City with skyscrapers. As I walked on the streets, however, I found graveled vacant lots between high-rise buildings; sometimes, sand was blown by the wind. During the daytime, no one was walking in this high-temperature area reaching up to 40℃. People use cars to travel in the city. To avoid the heat of the day, the conference started from seven in the evening and ended at around nine-thirty at night. During a meeting before the conference, participants from Sharjah suddenly started to leave the conference room one after another. A pre-recorded recital of the Quran was heard from loud speakers set up across the city. It was time for prayer in the evening.

By having a glimpse of their life, in which day-to-day activities are ruled by religious practices, I recognized that the state of loss of such religious adherence has been referred to as "secularization." Today, the pros and cons of secularism have been debated in the field of religious studies. Based on Protestantism, secularism, which originated from the Enlightenment in the Western world, has defined the world of faith as something irrational that should be

confined to the private sphere. For this reason, the Muslim world, in which the public sphere is dominated by so-called "religion" in the western terminology, has tended to be considered outdated and stagnant, restricting freedom of religion. Probably, day-to-day activities ruled by religious practices would look simply uncomfortable for Westerners who live in a highly secularized world. It should be noted, however, that people's day-to-day activities outside the Muslim world are also ruled by factors other than so-called "public religion." Obviously, people who live in a secular society are ruled by secular political power. Rules, whether religious or secular, should be recognized as indispensable but suppressive components in peoples' lives, as long as they keep the order of day-to-day activities.

As French philosopher Michel Foucault discussed, "truth" and "power" are two sides of the same coin, for good or bad. Generally, when people wish to believe that the society to which they belong is free, they tend to assume that a society with apparently different characteristics is completely flawed and unhealthy; when people wish to criticize their own society, they tend to glorify a society that appears to be different. Whichever may be the case, such attitude represents merely a projection of imagination in one's mind on other societies, regardless of the actual state of such other societies. This is referred to as *Orientalism* as advocated by Edward Wadie Said, a Palestinian-American scholar of literature. In this context, there is an absolute lack of communication with other societies.

I saw people in traditional Arabic clothes—women in black and men in white—walking on the streets of Sharjah. The conference room was partitioned into two separate zones with a tape stretched across the room from one side to the other. As participants entered the conference room, men and women sat in different zones: men in the front and women in the back. At the University of Sharjah, male and female students study in different buildings and, unsurprisingly, have meals at different cafeterias. Arrangements are made so that female teachers teach female students and male teachers teach male students, wherever possible. At the conference, only men expressed their opinions, except for a few women from the royal family. Specific speakers were appointed in advance; individuals of high social standing took the podium in turn. At the banquet after the conference, most of the Arabian participants were men, except for the princess—who hosted the conference. Having witnessed this situation, some visitors from Westernized societies including Japan may have gotten the impression that Arab society is unfair in that women are oppressed and individuals from the privileged classes receive preferential treatment.

Nevertheless, each society has its own logic, and such habitance cannot necessarily be judged unequal unilaterally. As in the case of discussing whether monotheistic religions are more tolerant and fairer than polytheistic religions and vice versa, it is necessary to reveal how

each religious tradition functions in respective societies before drawing a conclusion. Without such an assumption, it is meaningless to discuss whether monotheistic religions are better than polytheistic religions and vice versa. What must be put to question in the first place is the validity of discussing religions totally, while ignoring their differences in each context, based on the concept that originated in the Western world (i.e., monotheistic and polytheistic religions). Needless to say, unfairness always exists in any society, and such unfairness must be corrected in each society. I hear that many immigrant workers from Southeast Asia and South Asia live in the Arab region and experience terrible discrimination. It is well known across the world that questions have been raised in recent years about the presence of these privileged royal families, even from within Arab society. Nevertheless, the statement based on self-affirmation of own society that Arab society is more unfair than Japanese society has no productivity to make meaningful mutual understanding. During my short stay, it occurred to me that I have not understood Arab society at all, and that such lack of understanding is not only my personal shortcoming but is closely linked with Japan's geopolitical position in international modern world.

I graduated from a Japanese university and a Japanese graduate school too. Naturally, my research career started by joining Japanese academic circles and developed toward interaction with the English-speaking area (mainly the U.S.), South Korea, and the German-speaking area, gradually. The latest stay in Arab society reminded me of the fact that the process in which the scope of my research activities expanded was simply the repetition of the process of Japanese modernity: occupation by the U.S. in the post-World War II period, an alliance with Germany during World War II, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance before World War I, and the colonization of East Asian countries. Arab and Balkan areas are located outside the historical experience of Japanese modernity. Although economic interaction with these areas gained momentum through oil field development in the post-World War II period, Arab and Balkan countries are still considered regions with which social exchanges have been mediated by the involvement of the process of Western modernization indirectly. It is persuasive if we think of the deep influences on these areas by Westernization. I assume that such geopoliticall indirect relationship between Japan and Arab countries caused me a sense of alienation during my stay in Sharjah.

In Japan, the issue of the separation of religion and state is inevitably and constantly on the minds of the people, as exemplified by controversies over prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Obviously, this religious mindset has been formed under the occupation policy by the U.S. in the post-World War II period. In this regard, the U.S.'s Protestantism has had an immeasurable impact on Japan, even though faith in Christianity was not mostly accepted. In other words, Japanese society accepted the Protestantism-based religious-secular dichotomy

where religion is related to the internal realm which is restricted to the private sphere of individuals, while the secular refers to non-religious factors such as the morals, culture, and politics that dominate the public sphere in society. Thus, the separation of religion and state is a typical example of a concept in which religion and the secular should be divided into private and public spheres, respectively. The concept of religion was imported to Japan from the Christianity-based Western world and has been shaped based on this religious-secular dichotomy. Nevertheless, the statement has been continuously made that Japanese society has a distinctive religious tradition different from the Western world, in opposition to the separation of religion and state and the concept of religion based on the idea of this separation. This statement of self-assertions has been periodically repeated, with support from some part of Japanese people who request the Japanese government to worship the war dead, no matter how prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni Shrine have been repeatedly criticized. Although it has to be admitted that the Protestantism-based concept of religion has been accepted in Japan, the concept has remained somewhat shaky due to conflict in society.

In terms of the criticism of the concept of "religion" transplanted from Western Christianity, religious studies researchers in Japan, including myself, are reminded of *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* written by Talal Asad, a Muslim who lives in the U.S. As has been pointed out, however, Asad's argument is quite different from those of native intellectuals who are active in the Arab world. Asad criticizes the concept of religion with Western readers in mind. Specifically, Asad intends to urge readers to reconsider the ways of faith that are based on Christianity (in particular, Protestantism-based internalism) that they take for granted as a universal concept. Thus, Asad's works are intended specifically to criticize the Western Protestantism-centered doctrine, to be inspired from the Islamic tradition. This is evidenced by the fact that Asad is one of the Diaspora who lives between the Western world and the Arab world. Asad's works have been translated with the keen interest of Japan's academic circles because, in the course of Japan's history, the concept of religion has been shaped based on the framework of Protestantism. In this context, the sheer indifference to the research of Asad, although he is also a Muslim, in the Arab region of Muslims is considered to be derived from the fact that, in a society where the so-called "unity of church and state" is inveterate, the theme of questioning an internalized faith does not exist in the first place.

However, one should not jump to conclusions that Japan is completely different from the Arab region. At the conference in Sharjah, Arabs people and Japanese people were able to discuss religious issues by using an English word "religion" as a medium. It is therefore obvious to say that the concept of Islam, like Shinto in Japan, has been profoundly influenced by the Western Christianity-based experience. Before World War II, Shinto was utilized to foster national identity. To avoid criticism that such policy violated the religious freedom of

individuals in Japan, Shinto was defined not as a religion in the private sphere but as part of the public morality in the public sphere. During the Asia-Pacific War, Shinto became the concept that transcended the Western religious-secular dichotomy. This is called as the theory that Shinto is not a religion. This logic used to avoid the concept of religion led in effect to the enforcement of Shinto on people in the Japanese empire, which included its colonies such as Korea and Taiwan. After World War II, Shinto was treated as a religion like Christianity and Buddhism in the private sphere by American Occupation policy. However, continuous efforts have been made by politicians and Shintoists who are discontented with this treatment to raise the status of Shinto to the category for defining the national identity once again. Such efforts are represented by the above-mentioned controversies over Yasukuni Shrine and recent activities by Meiji Jingu to advocate its shrine's forest as a peaceful public place for Japanense nation in order to establish their national identity which is provided by the grace of Meiji emperor.

Meanwhile, Islam is regarded as a monotheistic religion that has affinity with Christianity and Judaism, as clearly evidenced by the word "Abrahamic religion." In this sense, Islam is considered to perfectly conform to the Western concept of religion, as apparently opposed to Japan's Shinto. On the other hand, the Muslim world is incongruent with religious-secular dichotomy based on the separation of private and public spheres (as in the case of Protestantism) because the Muslim world upholds the unity of church and state. In that sense, Islam is perceived as something close to a state religion or an ethnic religion beyond nation-states' borders like Catholicism and Judaism. Due to this very nature derived from the unity of church and state, people in Western societies (in particular, societies that uphold the separation of church and state) suspect that Islam tends to fall into a fundamentalism that is likely to lead to political radicalism.

What attracts attention in this context is the fact that the discipline of religious studies hardly exists in the Arab region. It seems that Islamic theology or jurisprudence, which is similar to Christian theology in the Western world, is highly popular. There is, however, no room for Religious Studies (in which two or more religions are treated and compared equally, whether this is merely a pretext or not) to exist in the Arab society where Islam is the *de-facto* state religion. Here it is more required to discuss the differences among sects in Islam under the one and only Islamic theology, to meet the practical needs for everyday life. Although a hasty comparison should be avoided, it is reasonable to say that such a theological model for discussing differences in a single religious tradition is very much close to the situation in the Edo Period (1603–1867) in Japan when Buddhism was incorporated into the government's ruling system by means of registratering the population through temple affiliation, which left no room for the concept of the discipline of religious studies. After all, the discipline of religious

studies can exist only in Western societies based on the establishment of a secularized public space, for good or bad. To the contrary, the modern societies of Turkey and Japan introduced a system for the separation of religion and state from the Western world, even though the system involves inherent contradiction. In other societies, religion exists as the self-evident object of faith in order to serve as the state religion. There they don't need to relativize the state religion into the same level of other religions in oder to compare basing on the western concept of "religion" as a neutral zone for any kind of religious believers even if they may attempt to refer to other traditions like Christianity, Buddhism and Shinto.

In this way, both Islam and Shinto have been reorganized in modern ages in the course of interaction with the Christian concept of religion or religious-secular dichotomy, although there have been reactions in different ways. Obviously, the paths toward modernization have not been monolithic, but the Western modernization endorsed by Christianity-based traditions should be considered as a common premise that enables diverse interpretations and applications. That is why Japanese researchers of Shinto (like myself) and Arab Islam researchers were able to smoothly discuss at the conference, even though this was the first time we saw each other. The strong influence of Western modernization can be observed in many aspects in Dubai, which is home to many high-rise buildings, or at the University of Sharjah, which we visited. At the university, female students neatly cover their hair with black scarves (hijab), but they put on exquisite makeup, just like Hollywood actresses, on their faces. There was a man in traditional Arab clothes at the conference; on the following day, he appeared at our hotel in a business suit, just like a Western business person, to pick us up for sightseeing.

As I pointed out several times at the conference, if the Arab people consider Shinto to be an historical Japanese tradition that has been handed down from ancient times, or if Japanese people consider Islam to be an indigenous tradition unique to the Arab world that has remained completely unaffected by Westernization, it is only a misconception due to the Orientalis imagination of each party. In the first place, the binarism-based concept behind Orientalism should be put to question. Westernization and non-Westernization should not be considered two opposing concepts. Rather, one should consider that non-Western factors are weaved into Westernization in a fractal structure.

For example, Shinto does not conform to the Protestant concept of religion in that Shinto does not have churches, scripture, or a founder. Thus, Shinto is likely to be classified into a secular category as it was in Japanese society before World War II, when one tries to understand Shinto based on religious-secular dichotomy. Rather, the nature of Shinto that has been handed down from pre-modern ages does not fit into such a dichotomy in the first place;

it is more appropriate to say that Shinto does not belong to religion or to the secular. It should be noted, however, that the Christianity-based argument became dominant in modern ages in Japan, and therefore factors that did not fit into the religious-secular dichotomy had to be redefined in connection with the Protestant dichotomy. This is because the Japanese government had to allow its citizens to enjoy "freedom of religion," even in a copycat manner, as proof of being a civilized nation which should be based on the separation of religion and state, so that Japan could be acknowledged as an independent sovereign state in an international society dominated by the great powers of the West. In fact, it is safe to say that such efforts enabled Japan to successfully abolish unfair treaties with the great powers of the West and overcome the crisis of colonization.

As discussed above, Western modernization has a fractal structure with non-Western factors built into it. However, such non-Western factors cannot be discussed in the setting of a single experience; they are largely different in respective regions, i.e., the Muslim world and Japan. Influenced by different Western states, Japan and Arab countries had significantly different experiences in modern ages. Arab countries were colonized while Japan grew into an empire comparable to the great powers of the West. At this conference, members of Sharjah's royal family, who sponsored the conference, and parties concerned stated in their speeches that we Japanese researchers were invited in order to learn about Japan's success in modernizing their nation-state and building a Western-style sovereign state without being colonized, while maintaining seemingly unique cultural and religious values that are different from those of the Western world. There is a strong yearning for the *wakon-yōsai* (Japanese spirit combined with Western learning) doctrine that was once prevalent in Japan before World War II. For Arab intellectuals, Japan seems to be a society that skillfully absorbed Western culture in terms of technology and retained cultural traditions including Shinto and Buddhism in terms of mentality. Indeed, Japan's model surfaced as their future vision in the course of reviewing the countermeasures to compete against the Western world within the inevitable surge of global capitalism. Quite impressive were Arab intellectuals' (i) consensus that the most epoch-making event in Japan's modern history is the victory over the Western great country of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and (ii) indifferent response to Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War and the nuclear power plant accidents in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake, among others. I strongly felt their complicated reaction to Western modermnization through their ambivalent attitude toward Japan. On the one hand, I recognized their strong desire to be a politically and economically strong and independent country which Japan has reached at, on the other hand, have to fill the dark side of the history of the Arab countries that suffered the colonization by the Western countries.

Admittedly, such favorable evaluation of Japan's modern history is appreciable and may

serve as a positive factor in building friendships between Arab society and Japan. However, intentionally I took the opportunity of stating at the conference, though I was aware that my statements would not meet the expectations of the Arab people, that Japan's success in maintaining its independence as a sovereign nation was backed up by Japan's invasion and colonization of the Asian region, i.e., Taiwan and Korea; that Shinto and Buddhism were propagated to the Asian Continent in line with imperialistic expansion; that the colonized Asian people were forced to worship Shinto and lived in disgrace; and that the Japanese people's understanding that Shinto represents a tradition particular to the Japanese nation as an ethnic religion was shaped and accepted as a mainstream theory in the course of history as Japan lost colonies due to its defeat in the Asia-Pacific War. I also discussed that the existence of Japan's emperor system is a major reason that people in the United Arab Emirates (a state under the royal family's rule) have a positive attitude toward Japan, but that Japanese opinions about the emperor system have been diverse in Japanese modern history; and most importantly, it is necessary to take into consideration that the sentiments of people in East Asia, who were once compelled to worship at Shinto shrines, are totally different from those of many Japanese people.

The history of any region or society has both bright and dark sides. Serious academic interactions would begin only through discussions that cover the dark side of the history of each other's countries. In that sense, for Arab countries including the United Arab Emirates, Japan still remains an abstract and ideal presence which is somewhat isolated from their day-to-day lives, that serves only as a pretext to promote anti-Western slogans.

Notably, it has remained generally difficult to have serious and honest dialogue between researchers of Japanese history in Japan and those in the U.S., and between researchers of religions in Japan and those in South Korea,due to close love-hate relationships in the past. Difficulties in sincere dialogue are not limited to those in the relationship with the Arab countries. In question is the attitude at the dialogue (i.e., how researchers in one country should communicate with counterparts in other countries) and the purpose of dialogue (i.e., whether to be only praised by the people of other countries, or to interact in order to grow together). Naturally, individual researchers will be required to partly represent the history of the countries to which they belong and, at the same time, to facilitate communication as individuals beyond the political affiliation defined by their coutries. If researchers were able to practice such an attitude in the course of interactions at our dialogue, they could cooperate in critically analyzing (i) the structure of global capitalism that connects Japan with the Arab region on the one hand, and (ii) the history of Western modernization that is aimed at homogenizing everything,

As stated in recent years by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian scholar of English

literature who lives in the U.S., so-called post-colonial criticism has been based primarily on India's experience under British colonial rule. Spivak asserts that the current problem arises from the fact that, although post-colonial criticism merely represents the conceptualization of experience in only a handful of regions like India under British empire, post-colonialism has been overrated to the extent where it is accepted as a kind of universalized theory. Based on Spivak's assertion, we should go beyond simply following post-colonialist arguments and transform such arguments by taking into consideration the modern history of East Asia, the Balkan Peninsula, and Central Asia. In the case of Japan's modern history described by Japanese researchers, old-fashioned Japanese view of Western centrism must be corrected. To this end, much attention should be focused on the history of interaction with the Korean Peninsula and China as well as Southeast Asia, which was once controlled under the Japanese Empire.

To discuss Japan's experience in modern ages based on interaction with East Asia and the Western world in more relative terms, comparison with the experience of the Arab countries that have a different history of negotiations with Western countries will be increasingly significant. I hope that the latest conference, even if it was an Orientalism-based encounter, serves as the first step of dialogue for Japanese and Arab researchers to develop a deep relationship with each other. In the course of this development, Doshisha University's Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions can play a role in no small way. I am looking forward to future developments.