

The Religious Sentiment of the Japanese (III) — Concerning Whales —

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In 1988, commercial whaling was finally brought to an end. In regard to this problem, Japan, which has desired to continue whaling, has been the target of much criticism. Deep in the background of the desire to protect whales and preserve animals, there is a major gap between the religious thinking of Westerners and that of the Japanese which cannot be overlooked.

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From its establishment in 1948, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) has shouldered the burden of making international whaling agreements. Its role is to plan for appropriate preservation of whale species and make possible a regulated development of the whaling industry by enforcing and promoting international whaling regulation accords. It has functioned well in measuring whale resources and settling whaling limits.

It is said that the history of whaling is one of excesses. One gets the strong impression that a large number of varieties of whales have actually been killed off and that whale territories have been destroyed one after the other. It is only natural that there has been an increase in contentions that if this is allowed to continue, the whales of the world will become extinct.

But are all varieties of whales really facing extinction? According to the report of the International Decade of Cetacean Research (IDCR) of the IWC, minke whales in the Antarctic Ocean in 1985 numbered 258,321, compared with 109,675 seven years earlier.

This increase may be partially attributable to the increased precision of surveying skills, but it does appear that, as a result of the decrease of larger whales, the minke whale is inhabiting a more extensive area and it is anticipated that the increase will continue.

From the fact that the population of minke whales is flourishing so, the concern that all whales are facing extinction is both irrational and unscientific.

However, Japan's contentions have been dismissed, and commercial whaling has been banned completely. Due to sanctions and the reduction of whaling quotas in the northern seas, Japan has had to weigh deep-sea fishing against whaling and has

accepted the fate of withdrawing from whaling entirely.

The problem is not merely one of conserving whales. Nature conservancy groups view whaling as part of the destruction of the natural environment. In their appeals to put a stop to the ravaging of the earth's ecosystem, whaling has been placed alongside pollution, food contamination, nuclear testing and nuclear power stations.

In the advocacy of animal conservation, whaling, of course, is censured. Whales are held to be extremely intelligent, and, more than anything else, lovable wild animals. Therefore, it is highly objectionable to kill them, and even more so to eat their meat.

Surrounded in this way, many Japanese have brought forth counterarguments. First of all, if one is truly concerned about the extermination of the whales, since the Greenland whale is in greatest danger, then allowing Eskimos to continue to hunt them is a problem, no matter how essential it may be to their livelihood. If indiscriminate hunting were to be prevented on the basis of scientific data, that would be one thing. But whales, as opposed to coal for example, are a renewable resource.

It is also odd to slaughter cows and pigs in large numbers for their meat, then to condemn the slaughter of wild animals. Should we not slaughter whales because they are intelligent and lovable, and then turn around and slaughter animals which are held to be less intelligence and less affable?

This debate has ended in talking at cross-purposes. In the background there appears to be a difference in thinking about whales. The shades of cultural friction are strong.

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Let us look at the outline of the relation between Japanese and whales. Needless to say, the economy of the Stone Age was one of gathering natural resources through hunting and fishing.

Surveys of the remains of ancient garbage heaps has confirmed that a wide variety of food was harvested, including marine products, animals, and seeds.

Whales were also eaten. To give an example, in the Kuroya shell mound (*kaizuka*) in Saitama Prefecture, whale bones have been excavated and they have been estimated to be from the early Jomon period, more than 5,500 years ago. It has been proven that during the Jomon period in virtually every part of Japan, finback whales, porpoises, sunameri porpoises, dolphins, and killer whales were eaten.

Even in the present day, there are cases of herds of porpoises and pilot whales committing mass suicide by coming up on the shore, probably a result of being attacked by the ferocious killer whale. It is easy to presume that in ancient times

people took as food these animals that had come up on the shore, for it is difficult to imagine that they would have risked whaling in the small boats used at that time.

It is said that Japan participated in coastal whaling as early as 400 years ago. In the 17th century, the taking of whales by net was developed. First, nets were thrown over the whales to restrict their movement, then great bravery was required to deliver the decisive blow with a sword. This method was in use for over 250 years.

To be sure, in Japan the whale was thought of as a type of fish. In the Chinese characters meaning "whale" are two components meaning "large" and "fish." There are two other characters for whale which are read together as *isana*, literally "valiant fish."

In the *Kojiki*¹⁾ and the *Nihon Shoki*²⁾ there is a word which is read *kujira* (the modern Japanese word for whale), but it is more reasonable to think that this is an ancient Korean word meaning "hawk." However, due to the appearance in the *Manyoshu*³⁾ of two sets of *makura kotoba*, "pillow words," both read *isanatori*, it is clear that already by the 8th century the whale was a "fish" that the people were rather familiar with.

In 678, Emperor Temmu, out of devotion to Buddhism, forbade the consumption of the meat of cows, horses, dogs, monkeys, and chickens, and thereafter, other emperors issued similar interdicts. For approximately one thousand years, the consumption of meat was prohibited..

There is evidence that in the middle ages, because whales were not considered to be animals, people ate wild boars, which they referred to as "mountain whales."

Even in Europe, it was not until the 17th century that the Greek Aristotle was set aside and in England and Denmark whales were dissected and confirmed to be mammals. In Japan, until 200 years ago, whales were still not recognized as animals.

The modern Norwegian style of whaling was conceived in 1864, the first Japanese boat constructed specifically for whaling was built in 1899, and Japan began participating in the grand whaling activity of the Antarctic Ocean in 1934. Following the Second World War, the Soviet Union and Japan were the central whaling nations.

In Europe, whaling was carried out to obtain inexpensive whale oil, but in Japan it was carried out for both oil and meat.

Major whaling nations such as Norway and England began to withdraw from the whaling enterprise around 1960 because the costs became prohibitive.

At the end of the war, the food shortage in Japan was severe and school lunches were sustained on powdered skim milk and whale meat. According to "Changes in the Annual Per Capita Consumption of Various Meat Products" in the three-year period beginning in 1947, whale meat occupied a large percentage (40%) of total meat

consumption.

In a 1983 Japan Whaling Association questionnaire administered to 2,000 Japanese 20 years of age or older, 86.1% replied that they had eaten whale meat, including processed foodstuffs. Those who replied that it was acceptable to eat whale meat as long as resources were conserved and those who replied that it was probably all right to eat whale meat totalled 79% of the respondents.

These figures reveal clearly how the Japanese people think of whale meat as a source of food. Because of the long prohibition against the consumption of meat, the Japanese have come to depend on marine products for animal protein. Thought of as a variety of fish, whales became one of the bounties of the sea and there evolved a considerable difference in the Japanese view and the European view of whaling for the sole purpose of obtaining whale oil.

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One of the major points in the criticism of Japan is that the Japanese make use of whales as food.

It would appear the West and Japan have quite different views concerning the eating of meat and this bears some scrutiny.

The first thing one ought to consider is the conditions of the natural environment. It is well known that the Japanese summer is hot and humid, and when Japan was moving from a hunting and gathering culture to a settled, rice-cultivating culture, Europe was experiencing an extended cattle-raising age. One can say that Japan is suitable for rice crops and Europe is suited for the raising of cattle. In Japan, land suitable for pasturage is extremely limited. On the other hand, land in Europe is highly unsuitable for rice paddy agriculture. The percentage of total agricultural lands devoted to stock farms and pastures is 61% in England, 30% even in Italy, but a mere 4% in Japan.

European wild grass, in contrast with Japanese wild grass which is tough and grows quite large, makes a natural fodder for cattle raising. This is precisely the reason why Europe became a meat-consuming culture. On the other hand, because of the cultivation of Japanese glutinous rice, Japan became a rice-consuming culture. Of course, these terms are used in the broad sense because the European diet also includes dairy products and the Japanese diet also includes varieties of millet as substitute foods.

We can trace the source of European civilization to Greek thought and Christianity. Ancient Greek philosophy held that man, because he possessed reason, held a predominant

position within the natural world.

Christianity sprang forth from the womb of Judaism, the religion of the ancient Hebrew tribes who made a living as nomads in the desert, where harsh conditions prevailed.

We find ancient Hebrew thought in the Old Testament of the Bible. The two predominant features of this thought are belief in a single deity who is severe and unsurpassed and the concept of being the chosen people. The Ten Commandments of Moses can be viewed as a constitution of a people struggling with every effort to protect their own way of life against the severity of nature and through strife with other peoples. Nomadic people do not strive for unity through multitheism like agricultural peoples.

Throughout the Old Testament at least, God is seen as the creator of the entire natural world and God's image is masculine, paternal, and severe. Mankind is made in God's image and man is granted the right to reign over nature.

Christianity succeeded to the Hebrew faith in a single deity and also accepted the Hebrew view of other living things, especially that concerning cattle. Sheep, the representative stock animal, was especially permitted by God to be made use of for food.

Genesis 9 : 2 - 3 says the following :

The fear and dread of you shall fall upon all wild animals on earth, on all birds of heaven, on everything that moves upon the ground and all fish in the sea ; they are given into your hands. Every creature that lives and moves shall be food for you; I give you them all, as once I gave you all green plants.

In other words, God permits man, who is made in his image, to kill other animals for food, and this means a complete severance between human beings and animals.

Let us look at the case of agricultural peoples. In India, the predominant cattle is the cow. The cow is a work animal which supplies valuable labor, and from the animism commonly found in agricultural societies, i.e, the belief that all sentient beings have a soul, and the pre-Buddhist belief that there is a transmigration of the soul upon death, the cows are regarded as sacred.

The agricultural Japanese race was also traditionally animistic. Following the introduction of Buddhism and the establishment of its precept that mountains, rivers, grasses, and trees without exception become buddhas, there continued to exist an

intimate feeling of unity between humans and animals.

The disparity in this way of thinking in terms of protection of animals and the slaughter of animals is quite striking. There is among the Japanese a tendency to treat animals in the same way as humans and to think of protection as never killing an animal. For example, if for some reason a Japanese can no longer care for a pet dog, he would probably abandon it alive. This has led to the increase in wild dogs and this has become a social problem. In Europe, on the other hand, if abandoning a dog to the wild would cause the animal pain, it would be considered better to kill the animal.

As we have seen, it seems that in Europe there is a strong religious psychology at work based on the idea that cattle are permitted to man by God as a source of food, be human predominance and natural conditions what they may. In comparison, in Japan the ties with cattle raising are weaker, and because of obedience to the Buddhist prohibition against the taking of life, the eating of meat has long been spurned.

When we look at food taboos, it is overwhelmingly apparent that taboos concerning animals far exceed those concerning plants. Explanations of the causes of taboos tend to escape reason. However, it is said that the reason the Jews even today do not eat pork is that the Old Testament says that pork is abhorrent and that it is not permitted for consumption. It appears that the Hinduists' avoidance of beef is also of religious origins.

From this perspective, it seems likely that the reason for Europeans not eating whale meat is due to religion.

According to Leviticus 11: 9 -10,

As to fish, you may eat whatever has fins and scales, whether taken from rivers or from the sea ; but all other water creatures are strictly forbidden you. You mustn't eat their meat or even touch their dead bodies.

During the time when whales were considered a kind of fish, as scaleless fish they were believed to be abominable. Today only the Jews strictly obey the Old Testament, for the New Testament, which the Christians adhere to, has no such prohibition. However, the taboo which originated during the ancient period of nomadistic culture, still remains deep in the subconscious and is apparent in the continued dislike expressed toward consuming scaleless sea animals like the whale.

On the other hand, the Japanese have been quite used to varieties of marine products since ancient times, and because of Buddhism and its prohibition against the

consumption of wild animals, the whale has been considered a bounty of the seas and a blessing of nature. As a result, the Japanese have absolutely no resistance against the eating of whale meat.

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In the matter of whaling, there is also a major influence from the differences of views of nature between Japan and the West.

The modern natural sciences rest upon the foundation of the philosophy of Descartes. That is, man (as subject) observes nature (as object) objectively in the search for natural laws. In the process, the observer and the observed are completely separated, nature being completely separated from man, strictly divided into distinct entities.

Hence, natural science has discovered various laws of nature and has both applied and altered nature for the benefit of mankind. However, it is common knowledge that the reverse side of the glittering advances of natural sciences has been the destruction of the environment on a global scale.

Partially because Japan since ancient times has been blessed by a bountiful natural environment, Japan never developed the antagonistic view of nature prevalent in the West. The Japanese loved nature and lived in unity with it. However, nature in Japan changed dramatically around 1960. "Natural" nature has become difficult to find and has become almost entirely an "artificial" nature, and the destruction of nature by such things as pollution has become a grave problem.

This indicates that the Japanese view of nature has become homogeneous with that of the West, and would seem to parallel a dilution of religious sensibility.

The Japanese word *shizen*⁴⁾ is translated as "nature," but originally *shizen* was a Chinese word. In this respect, *shizen* does not mean "the universe," but rather "of itself" or "of its own accord." It is a word which was brought to Japan from China along with Buddhism.

The Chinese view of nature can be seen clearly in Lao-tse whose ideal was to live according to "the state of things as they really are" (*mujinen*). That is, to recognize oneself as one is in the workings of creation, to throw off the art of humanity and intellect and reason, and to live in accord with the way the universe is.

This way of thought made a great impact on Buddhism and was transmitted to Japan. One can see its influence especially in Pure Land Buddhism. Cultivated within Buddhism, it may be called a precious wisdom of the Orient, but Japanese today seem to have forgotten it.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who proclaimed the doctrine of "reverence for life," held that it was logic not only for relations between human beings, but also for the relationship between man and nature. The logic is also quite Buddhistic.

The Japanese themselves ought to recall this time-honored wisdom. Neither is nature something to be subjugated by man nor are man and nature separate entities. In this sense, it is necessary to search out a new view of nature as soon as possible. And it must be a view which is global and universal. In this respect, Japanese Buddhism has great strength to offer.

This essay has focused on the problem of whaling, resulting from the differences in the view of nature and differences in religious sensibility between Westerners and Japanese which have resulted in emotion-charged arguments. When one considers the disappearance of whale cuisine as a part of the diet and the deterioration of whaling skills, and, in turn, the anticipated future global food shortage, one can only regret that the discussions and explanations that preceded the prohibition of commercial whaling had been more rational.

The references listed below have proven suggestive and informative. I am especially indebted to Zenjiro Doi's *Washira no Kujira* (Our Whales), which is based on his experiences aboard a whaling "mother ship" over 163 days from departure in October 1984. This volume was extremely informative and I have made considerable reference to it. I would like to take this occasion to express my gratitude to the author.

NOTES

- 1) It is also called *The Ancient Chronicle* (古事記): The oldest history book in Japan. It consists of 3 volumes and was completed in 8th century.
- 2) It is also called *The Chronicles of Japan* (日本書紀): The oldest another history book of Japan by Imperial command. It consists of 30 volumes written in classical Chinese, and was completed in 720, Nara period.
- 3) They also call it *A Collection of a Myriad Leaves* (万葉集): The oldest collection of Japanese poems. It was completed in Nara period and consists of 20 volumes.
- 4) 55 words of 自然 (*jinen*) can be found in *The Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra*—the basic canon sutra of Pure Land Buddhism.

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