

— Chapter Eight — Shintō is the World's New Religion of Ecology

• Ecology: the super religion

Ecology is becoming a global super religion.

I came to think this way the other morning, when my wife asked me to take out the garbage.

It occurred to me when I saw people who were putting their garbage into separate bags and carrying them out in a reverent manner with devout expressions on their faces — as if they felt they were making an offering to the gods.

Lately, particularly in advanced countries, existing religions seem to have lost their strength. It is lamentable that there is a growing loss of interest in religion, be it Buddhism or Christianity.

Religion supports societal stability as it affords a common moral sense and sets standards of good behavior through a reliance on the existence of a supreme being. If that strength is lost, people lose sight of their ideals and turn into beasts who are aroused only by their egoism, and society heads for destruction.

Given such conditions, ecology seems to have appeared as a new religion (people sharing the same code of ethics) taking the place of the extant ones. It is becoming what could be called a "super religion" all over the world.

In ecology, there is an eschatological view that if pollution continues as it is now, it will mean the end of the world. There are those who don't understand if one talks about "sin," but whose hearts ache if one says instead, "pollution." Ecology is tied to the very life or death of the planet, so it meets the requirements to be a global super religion.

Until now, every religion has had as its goal becoming one with God or the Buddha.

Ecology, on the other hand, has as its goal becoming one with nature. Nature has replaced the gods and buddhas.

Of all living things, only man has mythology, and has created various religions. The reason for this is that only man was given the ability to think; a line was drawn in the natural world. Putting distance between nature and oneself does not create a unification with nature.

Because of this, people are tormented with deep doubts and uncertainty, wondering, "What am I? What is space?" For such people, gods and buddhas were a way to understand the connection between man and nature.

For a long time, the gods and buddhas have been believed in as protectors of man. At the start of the nineteenth century, though, science cast a dazzling, bright light, and took the place once occupied by religion. Science replaced religion, explaining the relationship between man and nature and even appeared to be believed in as that which protected man.

Soon, for many people, extant religions ceased to be what they looked to for protection. Even Christianity, which was the foundation of European civilization, saw a drastic reduction in the number of people going to church. The number of promising young people intending to become priests or pastors also declined. Churches became less a place for worshippers and more a place for weddings, funerals, and other ceremonials.

With rapidly developing technology, on the other hand, science liberated people from

poverty and brought about an unprecedented affluence. Dealing with science and technology, however, became something that inflicted great injury to people's souls at the same time.

Along with the growing degree of independence as people gained economic affluence one by one, their connections with each other weakened and communities crumbled. As a result, people began to suffer from a sense of isolation.

In the meantime, the power of science and technology grew enormously, and destruction of the natural environment became a problem.

At the dawn of the Shōwa period, in his work *Nōmin geijutsuron* (Essays on the art of farming), Miyazawa Kenji lamented, "religion is exhausted and is being substituted for by science; what's more, science is cold and dark." Today, science is being viewed with deep suspicion as something that is not only cold, but as something in danger of inflicting irreparable harm on the natural environment itself.