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SHUGENDŌ¹ AND ECOLOGY

Economic growth, human beings and ecology

It is quite self evident that the single most powerful force shaping the lives of whole nations as well as of individuals is the economic growth. The almost religious devotion to that notion seems to be in many cases something, though not sufficiently justified, beyond any doubt and treated as something that should not even be considered a subject that could pose any questions. There are uncountable instances that could be presented here, but to point out just a single good one, would be to mention the decision of the Japanese government to resume the operation of atomic power plants after the accident of Fukushima in 2011. The original plan of the government was to check the safety first and then consider reassuming the operation of the plants, but because of the lobbying of economic organizations and influential individuals, not the justified knowledge or expectations based on evidence, that it will become so, but only the slight possibility that it may influence the economic growth of the region was strong enough to overcome the real threats to safety of the lives and properties of people living in the hazardous areas. The slight possibility of slower economic growth is much more powerful than the real threat to human life when it comes to the morality of decision makers.

¹ Shugendō is an over 1300 year-old Japanese syncretic religious tradition combining Animism, Shamanism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Taoism, among others, and ascetic practices in the mountains.

The economic growth ideology seems to be omnipresent and omnipotent in shaping not only the ways we live but also the ways we think and feel. There would be nothing wrong with it, if it was our conscious, responsible and free choice, but in most cases it seems not to be so. Especially in Europe and North America, the faith in economy has already replaced the faith in religion such a long time ago, but almost during the same time it has secured most features of the latter one. For the sake of economic growth, nations hate each other, exploit each other and fight with each other. But we seldom look for any rationalization for that beyond economical calculation or irrational rage. Even in the case that our reality is more complicated than this, we should still consider the reasons why economy has so much power over our lives, if it is a good and healthy situation and if not, how should we change it and what should be done to achieve it. The problem of ecology is also set more often in the context of economy than in any other contexts all together. In such a situation considering the problem of ecology or any effort to influence it from a standpoint other than the above seems quite futile. In spite of all that, since not all humans, though more or less involved in the worship of economical ideologies, choose them as main forces shaping their lives and the lives of their beloved, we may as well try to get something good of the ecological problems awareness and spend some time to analyze what ecology should really mean and what consequences it should bear, and also present quite a different worldview that may trigger some changes in thinking about economical values that, after all, set the ecological framework.

In this short article we shall try to present an alternative view on ecology based on the unique religious beliefs and practices of Shugendō that may also have practical and far reaching consequences for spreading ecological thought and practices involving its actualization. However before we consider the problem of Shugendō and ecology, we shall try to analyze a very important problem, namely if it is sufficiently justified to expect that ecology may be based on religion or have very close relations with it? As many have already pointed out, a religion might in fact have played a crucial role in the destruction of the environment in the first place and should not be allowed a say, since as long as it doesn't change radically, no true ecological thought will come out of it. Furthermore, it is also difficult not to get sarcastic when discussing ecology in the framework of the Western culture. When we consider the present state of ecology in the West it seems as if a few old men gathered one day, deliberated for some time and came out with a statement like the following: For many decades now, we have been mindlessly and systematically destroying our environment and creating hazards for our own health and existence. There are some smart people who came to notice that. From now on we should proceed with the destruction in a more sophisticated and less obvious way and call it ecological, to make people believe

that in fact we are preserving this environment of ours. The same people may ask: And what Buddhism has to say about ecology? expecting that no meaningful response will be produced. But we must remember that both the ideology that led to the abuse and destruction of the environment and ecological thought meant to preserve it so we could abuse it longer, both developed in the West and are based on the presumption of the humans right to do it which was scarcely present in non-European cultures before westernization. You can't just ask what Buddhists have to say about ecology because Buddhism is ecology. There is no intrinsic distinction between human beings and everything else, between humans and their environments and no presence nor justification of rights to abuse and destroy.

To rephrase it, it is really important to notice that ecology is in fact based on the same general principle that led to the industrial revolution and the destruction of the environment in the first place, which is the God given right to anthropocentrism. Generally we are not attracted to ecology because we have realized that we are an essential part of the environment, but because we fear that if the destruction goes any further it will become actual self-destruction of humanity, which we can't allow. Does it have anything to do with any kind of religious enlightenment? Probably not, but it is always good for the religious organizations to create theology that would fit the expectations and goals of the majority at any given time in history. Ecology itself is a notion based on the Western understanding of the world, nature and a human being as opposed to both. For that reason trying to consider the problem of ecology in a nonwestern cultural context is in a way a lost case, since the notion would not be compatible with cultural presumptions of different frameworks of thoughts. In the West, on the other hand, it seems quite simple, we humans have a right to utilize whatever is around us to our liking, and there can't be any doubts about that. Now, some of us found out that probably we have gone too far with an abuse of these things we have the right to abuse. So for the abuse to continue as long as possible we need to figure out a plausible way to reclaim our rights. The world is built in a very simple way, the human Self, as the master of the universe and the rest as something to be utilized. Theoreticians will doubtlessly oppose this kind of simplification, but it is also extremely difficult not to see that these unsophisticated notions govern most of our behaviors not only as individuals, but also as groups and societies.

The problem, however, lies not in the fact that we don't realize the above, but in the fact that for some reasons we chose not to act on those perceptions. "Much of environmentalism is a response to a fundamental realization: something is very wrong with how we usually conceive of and treat the natural world. But what is the exact problem with our view of nature and our attitudes, and what would constitute an authentic intimacy with the natural world and an effective concern for the earth? There is always the danger that an environmental phi-

losophy, however sophisticated, will miss the primary substance of the problem. Indeed, the ideal we establish may not only fail to help significantly, it may in fact compound the problem or create new ones.”²

As Kamo points out in his essay we also need to be realistic about what we expect from ecology and what goals we should set to achieve. “The concept of environment is different from nature and ecosystems because it presumes existence of a certain subject. Needles to say, what we are questioning now is an environment of the human subjects. The environment to be protected is the one in which humans can live healthy lives. Environment protection is primarily for humans. If the above consideration is true, then slogans of the environment protection movements such as “Save the earth” or “Be gentle to the nature” are inappropriate, because such expressions imply nuances, that humanity makes altruistic efforts for the sake of the earth and nature, not for itself. Even if humanity is extinct, the earth and nature will somehow continue to exist. What we need to protect are the conditions of earth environment that make human existence possible. For that reason, what fundamentally provides motivations for our efforts is selfishness of humanity and we need to be aware of it for a start.”³

Popular contexts of ecology

As we have seen, ecology and many related ideas are regarded as an integral part of the western paradigm and are believed to have their origins there. But the problem with ecology understood as an awareness of necessity to take care of the environment is a little bit like with discovering America by Columbus. The Americas were there and would have been even if not “discovered” and what Columbus’ arrival did was making them a part of the European world and initiating changes that had led to a complete destruction of what Americas were before the event of the discovery. From the point of native Americans the event had no claims whatsoever to be called discovery. From their point of view it was clearly an invasion or an incursion. But we are not here to judge, but try to use it as an analogy to show that what we think to be a discovery of ecology, for some other cultures may be evaluated in quite a different way and that there may be some cases when our great discoveries are something quite obvious for someone else.

² David L. Barnhill, Roger S. Gottlieb edit. *Deep Ecology and World Religions, New Essays on Sacred Ground* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 91.

³ Naoki Kamo, Mitsuo Tanimoto edit. *Kankyō shisō o manabu hito no tame ni* (Kyoto: Sekaishisōsha, 1994), 8–9.

For that reason it is necessary to reconsider what we really mean by ecology before we start any discussions regarding related problems. Since possible interpretations of the term itself are so numerous, the people engaged in the discussion may in fact be talking about quite different things. So we need to keep in mind that the term ecology is far from being clear or intuitively understood. For example, when we see the slogan "Save the earth" we may feel that we understand it, but what does it really mean? Does the earth need to be saved? Fortunately humans don't yet have the means to destroy the earth completely, so it seems that it is safe for now and taking any particular actions does not seem to be necessary. If by saving the earth we mean preserving the environment in a form that is able to sustain human life, then it has nothing to do with saving the earth for its own sake, and our only concern in such a case is saving ourselves with no regard for the environment or the earth at all. As extreme as it may sound if saving the environment in the present state was our goal the best rational solution would be the elimination of the main causes of its degradation, the human race. The environment would be safer and more stable if we were not around.

Ecology and religion based morality

Sometimes it is quite obvious that religions want to get a free ride when considering the problem of ecology. Ecological consciousness is instantly growing and interest in ecology and continuity of humankind exceeds that of religion. The problem, however, lies not in the necessity of help from religion to solve environmental problems but rather in clarifying how and what elements of religious worldview and ethics might have contributed to the emergence of problems we now need to face on the ecological arena. As Lynn White points out, "Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion. To Western eyes this is very evident in, say, India or Ceylon. It is equally true of ourselves and of our medieval ancestors".⁴

Some may think that religion may be necessary for introducing ethics to the area of ecology. But that would be mainly the case of those who think that ethics itself is not possible without its religious foundation. It is interesting to see that Japan, being a cultural context of Shugendō, which will be discussed later on in this article, has developed successful secular ethics that seems to be so far the most effective compared to other ethical systems. However, there are yet some

⁴ Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (Science, New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967)), 1205.

other reasons for having religions involved. For example, many people are more eager to take actions if they can expect some religious benefits, even as small as satisfaction from doing something not for the good of the subject, but for the greater glory of god or gods.

We need to be aware that the lack of compatibility and contradictions between hope for prosperity and peace for ourselves and future generations and personal priorities and agendas of individuals within given groups and societies. As long as the morality is based on foundations outside the society itself, it may only create an illusion of working for the good of the society but in fact it will be likely abused to serve the individuals or groups that have enough power to exercise their particular goals that are often opposite to the interests of the society they are members of and at which sake they are able to pursue their agendas. In many cases religions in fact not only justify but even encourage such behaviors. Wherever the god or gods are transcendental and the future promised heaven are also not from this earth, the fate of the nature seems to be obvious. It is quite interesting how times of religious fanaticism and times of common sense humanism take turns in human history, and how different these periods are when it comes to the range, spread and intensity of human suffering.

The humanist worldview and morality naturally seem to capture human beings and their activity within the framework of the environment as such and understand their codependence. Stressing the importance of the here and now, the responsibility for other human beings and the environment they live in will take priority over duties towards gods and expected rewards after death. On the other hand if morality needs to be grounded on some religious systems, then we will need a new religion to reach our ecological goals. But if this is not the case, religion might be helpful but is not necessary, or in some cases it may even in fact prevent us not only from understanding our conditions but also from seeing any need for revision of the past and changes for the future.

Christianity and the ecology

There are several thorough and wide-ranging books devoted to the problem of ecology and Christianity. We shall not repeat their convictions here, but mention only a few selected views. As Lynn White suggests, there is no way to separate Western culture from Christianity and the thesis that the western worldview and morality are based on Christianity, even when they claim to be secular, seems to be difficult to defeat. “Certainly the forms of our thinking and language have largely ceased to be Christian, but to my eye the sub-

stance often remains amazingly akin to that of the past. Our daily habits of action, for example, are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient. It is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from, Judeo-Christian teleology. The fact that Communists share it merely helps to show what can be demonstrated on many other grounds: that Marxism, like Islam, is a Judeo-Christian heresy. We continue today to live, as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms.”⁵ It is also highly significant that the preface of quite a remarkable selections of essays and articles titled “Christianity and Ecology. Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans”⁶ written by Lawrence E. Sullivan starts with the following words: “Religion distinguishes the human species from all others, just as human presence on earth distinguishes the ecology of our planet from other places in the known universe. Religious life and the earth’s ecology are inextricably linked, organically related”.⁷ Although this may be true of Christianity, it is difficult to say if and to what extent it applies to other religions. Further in his preface the author argues that religions furnish us with unique worldviews that, in turn, shape how we perceive ecology. Nothing truer may be said here. But from that truth follows also the fact of having multiple ecologies even when we share only one and the same earth.

Ecology within its western framework by default seems to be egocentric and anthropocentric, yet its main features seem to have originated rather from religious worldviews than secular ones. Full of anger and frustration, followers of ecological movements sometimes seem to be more focused on proving absolute correctness of the movement and its ideology than trying do understand how humans are interconnected with the world around them and what is the objective evaluation of their role in the development of the environment. At some point we need to realize that we are a very marginal part of the universe and our existence is not essential for its perseverance. There are some interesting facts we need to take into consideration while sorting out where we stand. Ecology is not about preserving species. Evolution seems to be indifferent when it comes to life and death, and has no mercy on species that are not able to adjust to the changing environment. If environmentalists had lived in the time of dinosaurs, they would probably have tried to save them but dinosaurs have perished anyway, and it had

⁵ Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (Science, New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967)), 1205.

⁶ Dieter T. Hessel, Rosemary Radford Ruether edit. *Christianity and Ecology. Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁷ Ibid. XI.

nothing to do with the existence or activities of humankind. Another important thought is that self-destruction of humanity may not be a bad thing anyway. For the most part of history humans have not been a part of earth environment development, and if they shall cease to exist, it probably will not constitute a very important moment in the life of the universe.

But for some reasons we may also take quite a different stand. "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image."⁸ If skillfully interpreted, this view can keep us safe from even considering ecology or problems we would need to consider once the ecology becomes relevant.

It is also possible to think that Christianity had no influence on Western culture whatsoever and hence is not responsible for all the repercussions, but this is also a rather extreme and not so common view. "Some environmentalists muttered slogans like 'Christianity is part of the problem!' as if they were some kind of sacred mantra. Christianity and the churches were either written off as an irrelevance or excoriated as actually *encouraging* the rape of the earth."⁹ The author claims that all misunderstanding of Christianity has its origins in the article "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis"¹⁰ written by Lynn White, but it is quite unlikely that the explanation could be that simple.

McGrath understands White's critique as an attack directed towards Christianity, but it seems to be a great misinterpretation of the author's message. White points at Christianity not so much as the enemy of the environmental movement, but as a cause of the crisis. McGrath would prefer to leave to problem of causes unsolved and avoid explanation by suggesting extreme complexity and ambivalence of Christianity and its influence on the development of the western societies and their realities, but White's suggestions and interpretations, though a little oversimplified, sufficiently explain the possible causes of the crisis we experience today. And looking at the more than 40 years that have passed since the publication of the article, one can be tempted to consider that White was quite right, since, in spite of great efforts of numerous environmental movements, due to clinging to the man versus nature diversity and anthropocentric world-view, we haven't seen the change in the paradigm of economic development yet.

⁸ Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (Science New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967)), 1205.

⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature. The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), XV.

¹⁰ Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (Science New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967))

As before, the corporations and governments keep implementing environmental measures only when they are forced to do so, not because of the concern for the environment, but because of the finesse or concern for the corporate image and sales.

Christianity tries to stress the importance of nature based on nature being god's creation, and as such deserving care. But it is also obvious that if everything is god's creation, and not all of it is good, then we have a serious problem keeping the system coherent. Another option we should consider here was introduced by Alister McGrath, "One highly influential approach is to insist that nature is sacred-to be thought of as a god or a goddess. Nature is therefore to be treated with the deference and respect appropriate to that divinity. This attitude can be found in the recent writings of the ecofeminist 'Starhawk' (née Miriam Simos), a witch (the term she prefers) from California who urges her readers to see nature as a goddess."¹¹ Although quite tempting, it stands no chance within western cultural framework. As Lynn points out, "Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."¹²

But again, let us assume that after all we accept our superiority and god given right to exploit the environment, what then? Here we may borrow another one of McGrath's insights. "A related approach to the ecological crisis essentially takes the form of an appeal to humanity's self-centered nature. If the human race is to survive, it will have to adopt a new and more respectful attitude to the natural world. That's not because there is anything special about nature. It's just that a failure to respect it will lead to an environmental catastrophe that will probably wipe us all out."¹³ It means that no matter what, Christianity will be forced to correct its teaching relevant to environment and ecology. It is interesting however, that neither treating the environment as sacred nor the fear of complete annihilation, has had much influence on our behavior. Western egocentrism on individual and social level is far too powerful for the above factors to make it retreat. McGrath writes that "Christians see the world as Gods creation, which we are called upon to 'tend.' This insight compels us to treat the natural world with respect, care, and concern."¹⁴, but it seems that this view is more of

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature. The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), XI.

¹² Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (Science New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967)), 1205.

¹³ Alister E. McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature. The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), XI–XII.

¹⁴ Ibid. 26.

a wish of nowadays ecologically minded Christians than an interpretation based on how the Bible pictures the relation. And besides the permission to utilize the creation to our own liking the end of the world and rebirth in heaven strongly suggest that no matter if god's creation or not, the nature and the earth are just disposable commodities. So we can just only hope that in spite of all of these ideological difficulties, Christianity will responsibly join the effort to create workable interpretations of nature after all.

But we must also remember that for most of the history of Christianity it was all right to use and abuse the world, since its being a creation meant nothing more than being creation of which the sole purpose was to serve humans. It is only recently that the view seems to lose its political correctness even among Christians. It is interesting that Christians realize that Christianity as it was for almost two thousand years of its history may be difficult to reconcile with modern ecological trends. But as Gordon G. Kaufman points out in his essay: "It is not that there is no way to reconcile Christian ideas and faith with modern ecological thinking. To accomplish this, however (in my view), the basic *anthropomorphism* of most of our received concepts and images of God – a remaining vestige of the deeply rooted *anthropocentrism* of our Jewish, Christian, and Moslem traditions – needs to be deconstructed, so that God can be reimagined and reconceived in ways that will facilitate more directly our becoming oriented *religiously* in terms appropriate to today's ecological understandings of the human interconnectedness with the orders of nature"¹⁵. Inventing and constructing a new Christianity is one possible solution, but it seems that western anthropocentrism went too far beyond its religious origins, that creating a new image of Christian god or new Christian teaching can have any influence on society.

Buddhism and ecology

It is difficult to present in a short article the contributions and insights that Buddhism has to offer to solving ecological problems, but no doubt thanks to Buddhist involvement in the ecology, a very important distinction was enhanced and given a slightly new meaning. This distinction is crucial not only for creating a paradigm of non-anthropocentric ecology and giving an alternative where the basic unity of human beings and their environment gets the proper theoretical foundations, but also helps to explain and understand Shugendō's veneration of

¹⁵ Dieter T. Hessel, Rosemary Radford Ruether, edit. *Christianity and Ecology. Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 26.

nature. The notion we shall first employ here is the “deep ecology”¹⁶. The term itself is not intuitively clear, but was developed and defined to point to the distinction between western anthropocentric ecology and ecology based on the fundamental belief that humans are an integral part of the environment and have no justification for the claim to be treated as nature’s absolute owners.

Buddhism teaches us to accept changes and not to cling to unreasonable regarding anything that changes as permanent or eternal. It teaches us to consider the changes we initiate, and learn to think of and accept the consequences. Not as rewards or punishments but simply as consequences of behaviors and actions we chose. Since we are interdependent, not so much with an absolute being, but with other beings and what constitutes our common environment, whatever we do bears consequences on us and all other beings and the environment around us. As human agents we have a capacity to make choices and to try to justify them, but more than justification we should be concerned with the results they will produce. Deep ecology should help us to see the interdependence and understand the consequences of acting or not acting on it, not as a spiritual or religious system of ecological ought or ought not to do, but rather as a rational clarification of conditions of our individual, social and environmental existence.

As David Landis Barnhill explains in his article *Relational Holism*: “There is also the issue of the fundamental experience of nature. The philosophical views of deep ecologists are often grounded in an intuitive experience of nature as a unified totality that we can relate to and that in some sense we *are*. A sense of being part of a vast, inclusive whole can enable one to drop a confined view of the self, give a feeling of being fully a part of and at home in nature, and motivate environmental activism. However, some ecofeminist critics charge that such an experience is deluded and merely manifests masculinist tendencies to absorb the Other or to transcend the concrete world of individual phenomena – tendencies that have been principal causes of environmental degradation and social injustice.”¹⁷ We can see that even this simple effort of clarification may be not as easy and obvious as one may expect, and our strive to proceed with solutions will always be disturbed by countless issues that are only loosely or even sometimes not relevant at all.

Deep ecology is also one of the notions that we need to be careful with when estimating their relevance for solving ecological problems. We have created a new term, deep ecology, and try to establish its relation to existing philosophies and

¹⁶ Deep ecology as a term was developed by Arne Ness in 1973. Since that time it evolved into a sophisticated and polysemous notion with non-anthropocentric view of nature as its core.

¹⁷ David L. Barnhill, Roger S. Gottlieb edit. *Deep Ecology and World Religions, New Essays on Sacred Ground* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 78.

religions. By doing so we try to define and clarify it, but here again it may just get its own independent existence as another theoretical construct where clarification itself becomes the main purpose of the endeavor, not contributing much to so solving real-life ecological problems or even helping to establish landmarks for what individuals or societies should be doing in this matter. Although theoretical work is necessary for grasping and solving real-life issues, as long as we only concentrate on it, the work is never done. Not to mention that applying theories to real-life cases bears risk of proving them wrong. Unfortunately fast piling up of deep ecology articles and books may be a sign of such drifting away from living or applying it. We need to stop for a while and examine if what we are in fact doing is not just repeating the same mistakes we made when working on ecology and Christianity. Buddhism should help us to keep focused on the reality as it is.

The Shugendō worldview

When trying to introduce issues concerning Shugendō to readers that have no access to materials written in the Japanese language, the first problem we face is the fact that materials about Shugendō published in languages other than Japanese are extremely scarce.¹⁸ For most of its history, Shugendō was a rather obscure religion that was entirely based on oral tradition without any sacred books whatsoever. Only in the second half of the last century various publications about the history and teaching of the religion in Japanese appeared, but unfortunately they were not followed by an adequate number of publications in foreign languages. And because of its ongoing obscurity it is very seldom that foreigners gain access to practices and teachings that are not included or described in already available books and articles.

There are also other reasons that make it quite difficult to talk about Shugendō as a uniform religion or teaching. The main reason we need to mention here is the lack of central authority responsible for the setting of orthodoxy.

¹⁸ There are only a few books about Shugendō available in English. A translation of Hitoshi Miyake *Shugendō: Essays on the structure of Japanese Folk Religion*, published by Center for Japanese Studies of University of Michigan in 2001., Hitoshi Miyake, *The Mandala of the Mountain: Shugendō and Folk Religion*. Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2005 and Byron H. Earhart, *A religious study of the Mount Haguro sect of Shugendō: an example of Japanese mountain religion*, Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970 are main sources of information available for English readers. There is also a book about Shugendō published in Polish, *Shugendō – Droga Górskiej Ascezy* by Krawczyk, J., published in 2006 by Wydawnictwo Trio.

Though nowadays the practitioners are associated in groups called *kō*¹⁹, with each group having its own governing authority on one hand and also associated with one of few Buddhist temples for some religious services and some other organizational purposes on the other, the scope and contents of practices is set by each group independently and personal beliefs of the practitioners are no matter of concern for the group whatsoever.

Shugendō being syncretic in its core teaching borrows a lot from Shintoism, Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism and for that reason it is far from being easy understood and acceptable for Westerners. In the West, mainly because of the exclusivist approach of Christianity to other religions, syncretism has rather unfavorable connotations, but for most Japanese it is quite natural and common. To illustrate this, we should just point out that Shintoism and Buddhism, two most popular religions of Japan²⁰, share most of their believers in spite of being theologically incompatible. It means that by nature Japanese are less keen to engage in theoretical discussions about religious differences and more inclined to practices and living their religions. Such a practical attitude towards religion, freedom of faith within religious organization and specific and unique religious practices place Shugendō in a very unusual position when considering environmental problems. Before we proceed further to introducing how nature is perceived in Shugendō framework, we need to point out one more difficulty of analyzing and evaluating environmental theories. No doubt that it would be possible to find some environmental movements that could be presented as related to Shugendō, but we should be really careful here how these factors are to be explained. Nowadays, for most academics environmentalism is a politically correct stand and everyone that regards herself or himself as a scholar working in the humanities should not only be concerned but also write something about the topic. Thus in writing about Shugendō and nature we face the same problem that deep ecologists do when developing their theoretical systems, namely the misplacement of the very goals of the examining and writing itself.

In the case of Shugendō, something we call environment or nature is so indistinguishable from humans that trying to interpret it using Western notions of ecology may lead to a complete misunderstanding of the Shugendō's native meaning of nature. Traditionally in Japan, human beings were never set in opposition to the notion of nature, they were essentially a part of it and until Western

¹⁹ A term referring to an association or group of people sharing the same beliefs.

²⁰ According to data published by Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan available on the Bureau's website, in 2013 the population of Japan was about 127 mln, of which over 100 mln are Shintoists and about 80 mln Buddhists. If the numbers are summed up, they clearly exceed the whole population of Japan.

thought had penetrated Japanese culture, there was no significant philosophical or religious movement that suggested otherwise. And it seems that for this very reason the notion of ecology, though possible to be interpreted and understood within the framework of modern industrial society and economic activities of enterprises, from the standpoint of the history of Japanese philosophical thought is in a way quite foreign and difficult to incorporate in the original cultural paradigm. Shugendō since its beginnings is not a religion of ideology, where beliefs and declarations of faith are more important than practicing a good life. Thus to look at ecology from a viewpoint of Shugendō would mean starting to look for the problems and solutions from the place and time where seeing oneself and everything as interdependent and one reality has been achieved.

Mountains and mandalas²¹

For Shugendō practitioners, mountains, specially Mount Ōmine in Nara Prefecture, and several other mountains all over Japan becoming regional centers for Shugendō practices, are in a way sacred places. But the analogy of sacredness of a temple does not apply here accurately. People visit temples to meet their gods, but in Shugendō, walking through the mountains and occasionally praying is less of a meeting with a particular god or gods but more of a meeting with oneself within a natural environment proper for religious practices. Thus, during the pilgrimage, by walking, praying and other religious practices practitioners forget about gods, about themselves and the practice itself just to be reborn and cleansed to become better persons in everyday life within a society.

One of the key concepts of mountain pilgrimage is religious practice (*gyō*) which also has quite different connotations and purposes than in other religions. For example, during Ōmine pilgrimage, practitioners may pass through places, where, if not careful enough, they may easily lose their lives. Putting oneself in such extreme situations like these helps to realize very basic conditions of our lives as human beings and our unity and interdependence with our environment. Also while climbing the mountains the practitioners often utter “*Rokkon shōjō*” (purification of the six roots of perception), which itself is also a call for purification and reflection on the practice itself.

Trying to establish the intrinsic value of nature apart from full participation in it seems to be missing the point. If we chose to think seriously of the environment

²¹ A visual schema of the enlightened mind or the universe in Buddhism.

because of its value, then to make it work we need to prove in a very convincing way that such value really exists and that it is relevant for individuals and societies that face environmental crisis. Being in the mountains and experiencing the unity and interdependence first hand does not require any further proof or theoretical justification, the only thing it deems necessary is action.

Deep or shallow, no matter how we interpret our relation to the environment, it will not change much the conditions of our existence, but how we perceive this relation will have a great bearing on how we act upon it. Why then can't we think of experiencing the world as a starting point for our ecological endeavor? Why do we chose to dwell on never-ending theoretical discussions just for their own sake? Do we really care or are we just looking for absolution? These are some of the unpopular questions we avoid asking. Can Shugendō and the real experience of the mountain environment help us to overcome these contradictions? It certainly could show us some alternative solutions and help us to better understand the limits of our present efforts.

Kubota explains that the essence of Shugendō lies in seeing and living the unity of man and nature. "Shugendō is a religion that developed from resonance of life, human beings and nature hailing each other. It may be said that Shugendō is a practice that places at its roots the simple and clear perception that human life is sustained within a nature containing water and trees. Thus one may say that Shugendō is a religion based on primordial relation of human beings and nature and on emerging there, what we could call "mutual sustaining of each other lives".²² There is no distinction between human beings and other beings that constitute nature, the distinction was never there, and even when we try to stress it, it is just our meaningless declaration that doesn't make it real beyond our own perceptions, not changing much of the real interdependence and unity within the universe that we are and will always be part of.

Kubota continues: "Going deep into the midst of nature. Realizing, that my internal universe is interlocked with the world. Startled with the fact that there is a world of origin giving rise to words. Then I notice that world is the organic synthesis of life"²³ It is important to realize that Shugendō is not about gods or nature as theoretical constructs, but what Kubota calls "the organic synthesis of life" is something that may be experienced with every cell of one's body while climbing up a steep mountain path surrounded by countless beings in their original and pure form. This does not mean that the same kind of experience is not possible in everyday life, because it is, it just makes it easier.

²² Nobushiro Kubota, *Shugen no sekai. Shigen no seimei uchū* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005), 11.

²³ Ibid. 18.

Walking the mountains as a form of religious practice

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Shugendō regards mountains as a sacred place for its religious practices. For that reason placing oneself in an environment far from civilization and from the sphere of everyday life becomes an important condition of the practice itself. Throughout the mountain pilgrimage various rituals are performed in selected places of spiritual value, but climbing itself is regarded as an essential element of the practice and also as a way of spiritual purification. There are quite a few places spread throughout Japan where Shugendō is practiced, but no doubt that the mount Ōmine²⁴ in Nara Prefecture is regarded as the most important one by most of the nominations and individual practitioners. It is also the only place in Japan that follow the ancient tradition of allowing only male practitioners to enter the mountain area during the pilgrimage season. Although nowadays this tradition is criticized by numerous gender activist groups it is still in place and honored for religious reasons. Of course it does not mean that women are excluded from Shugendō practices, it is not the case at all. On the contrary, as the number of overall practitioners seems to be decreasing, the ratio of female followers seems to be getting higher.

When we speak about religious experience we usually have in mind the unity of the individual being with something transcendental, something absolute, something supernatural. This experience has a meaning and is possible only through the experienced object, that is the supernatural and transcendental entity that is sometimes referred to as god. The experience of the nature in Shugendō is significantly different.

Are Shugendōs mountain practices then any different from mounting climbing or hiking enjoyed by so many people all over the world? Obviously, they are. But explaining how is not an easy task at all. In a way one may suggest that the difference of the religious experience of nature between the practitioner of Shugendō and somebody who entertains mere hiking is as the one between the person who comes to a church to pray and the tourist who comes to a church just for sightseeing to enjoy old paintings or beautiful sculptures. Even though they share the same space and at a glance may behave similarly, their experiences are significantly different. Or as with sitting at a dinner table and sitting while meditating, our attitude, meaning of a given behavior and expected results are quite different. For Shugendō practitioners going into the mountains means going

²⁴ The Mount Ōmine was registered as UNESCO World Heritage in 2004 as a part of the "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range".

into a place free from everything that can disturb the experience of unity with the environment and seeing themselves the way they really are without the social context of a given culture. Thus, Shugendō does not provide theoretical grounds for environmental education but experience of the deepest possible ecology on personal and individual level.

Identifying oneself with nature or the world we live in is not an easy task at all. Even if we may feel and understand the theoretical need for it, in practice we do not really know either the method or the results to be expected from doing so. Identifying oneself with nature may take place in a very theoretical way, by reading about the identification in a book, thinking it over and then declaring that it is done, and all of it may be done when sitting comfortably in a chair in front of a desk with a computer, pen, notebook and several books where the only non manmade thing you have may be a pine cone you picked up on the way home. Here we need to consider if this identification by declaration has or may have any bearing on ones way of thinking or behavior. The chances are that the influence is none or negligible. Thus practices of Shugendō or similar to these may be the necessary factor for individuals to find a real link between themselves and the environment that sustains their lives, not as a theoretical discovery but as an experience of real and continuous being within the environment. From that experience will follow an understanding of mutual interdependence of life and the true meaning of changes. One will also realize that for this identification to work the sole declaration is not enough.

Shugendō experience and its consequences for ecology

It is almost unimaginable that rules governing individual conduct and behavior will be based solely on the profits of life as a whole or the environment as a whole. All agents within any given environment tend to make choices that prefer their own good over this of others whenever they are in conflict. If we make false assumptions that it is not so, then we will never be able to solve the environmental problems. Trying to understand why we make such choices and what is necessary to make different ones, would be a great starting point for changing the paradigm for solving ecological problems.

We do not need to think minimalistically but we already have most of the technology necessary for reasonably comfortable existence, our ethical, moral and social sense is now retarded, causing a threat to the continuance of our own existence, so the priorities should be quite clear, but still not many people seem to take them seriously. The reasons are manifold, but one most fundamental is

that no matter what religion we follow or if we are not believers at all, somehow it happens that most of us are being brought up to be self-centered and egoistic. I do not mean extreme cases of egoism, but just one seen in motives of our everyday decisions. Like monks renouncing individual property live comfortable lives because they are free to use whatever commodities they need which are provided by their community or myself choosing to take a car instead of walking for a few kilometers. We have been educated in cleverness to absolve ourselves easily and skillfully, that even we ourselves will not realize that something is wrong with our reasoning. This seems also to apply to how we treat ecology. It is politically correct and it makes us feel good, but to go beyond it and take some real actions would require an immediate, visible and undeniable threat or danger.

Trying to work out a system of values that would be based solely on ideas that are common to all human beings, no matter what religion they follow may take us a step closer to workable solutions. It may be regarded as a contradiction that such a solution should be proposed by a particular religion, but it is also a uniqueness of Shugendō that allows it. Since, as we mentioned earlier, there is no rigid cannon of teaching or a single orthodox interpretation of what the practitioner should believe and how he or she should interpret their experiences, the faith itself may be, in its deepest part, based on what we could call a humanist stand.

If a religion helps us to understand what it means to be a human, with all its rights and even more with all its responsibilities, then it should get us closer to the humanist and universal way of being in the world and behaving accordingly to our capabilities to change it in a way that will reach win-win situation for human beings and for all other beings that we share the same reality with.

It is also important to understand and point out what elements of particular religion or religious view may help us change our attitude and lifestyle for more beneficial for the preservation of ourselves and all other beings in our environment. If such elements are present then it should not matter what religion they come from. But admitting that someone we may not like for some reasons may say something of a great value and wisdom seems more difficult than we expect. This is another reason why we need to think of ecological education as an education of tolerance and overcoming personal likes or dislikes and transcending limitations of a single religion.

Disregard for the environment and ecology is mostly based on personal consent for various kinds of violence against other beings, human or not. We are neither forced to destroy the environment, nor are we in a situation that we have no other choices. For some reasons we don't care or do not feel that these other choices are worth considering. If any religion can help us clarify why we are like

that and how we can change it, it should be welcomed to make its contributions. But not for its own sake but for the sake of helping believers to be better persons and better participants of the environment.

Shugendō has no specific moral teaching that could be pointed out as beneficial for immediate utilization in environmental movements. In every area of our life we tend to think that the more regulations, rules and laws we have, the better is our personal and social life, our relations with the environment and everything else. We feel safer if everything is stated clearly with a less possible margin for interpretation. Then we can proudly announce to ourselves and all the world that we are in compliance with it and nothing more seems to matter. Shugendō will not give particular solutions but will provide a chance to experience the unity with the environment within the setting that is little influenced by human activity; it will help to see directly how we are when stripped off from all the cocoon of cultural functions and relations we have in our everyday lives. In the past, when entering a tea ceremony room in Japan, one had to bend and go through a very low door, no matter what their social position was, just to create a space where human beings could meet as such, without regard to who they are and what positions they held outside the tea ceremony room. How many chances of such meetings do we have in our everyday lives now? How many chances do we have of being within the environment free from manmade artifacts without feeling estranged? Without a particular religious or secular worldview that from the beginning defines our experience of such an environment?

We need to be careful how we interpret the notions and ideas of different cultures, worldviews and religions. Once we take some ideas from their context and try to interpret them within the framework of a different system, we need to be aware that it completely changes the idea itself. Sometimes the sole effort to clarify it destroys it completely, since it may happen that the vagueness was an essential part of it or that it was defined by its relations to different ideas within the particular culture that are not clear or seem to be irrelevant to the interpreter.

So when Shugendō says that after completing the mountain practices one should go back to the society, be a good man and help others to be good, there is no much meaning in clarifying what a good man is or what helping others be good means. It is left to the individuals to decide. But it is also conveyed with an assumption that each and every person will know what it means once it becomes necessary to work on it. Shugendō should also help us realize that certain theoretical issues are not that important and have no bearing on our environmental behavior at all.

Conclusion

As we deliberated earlier, for ecology not to become a mere theory that has no bearing on human behavior it is crucial to analyze the real conditions that are in play when we build our systems of beliefs and values, and based on those, the network of our goals that we set for various reasons. If it is not realistic and based on rational understanding of the above, religion may turn not to be of much help here. It may help us to notice some problems but we are not confident it can be of any use with finding any solutions.

We shall stress again that ecological philosophy, religious or not, needs to create mechanism that will let it go beyond theoretical discussions and to be employed and influence a real world changes. For most philosophers and religious thinkers that aspect seems not to be necessary for gaining scholarly satisfaction but we need to understand that for the ecological theory to have any meaning it needs to be applicable to some practical instances. It is difficult to point out clear instances where religious consideration of ecology made any real changes in environmental policies or everyday lives of majority of believers. It is rather the case that the sole thinking about nature and ecology completely fulfills our ecological needs.

As Michael E. Zimmerman points out: “There is no denying that modernity has created many problems, ranging from nuclear weapons and ecologically destructive industries, to personal meaninglessness and social nihilism. As long as we want be able to solve the problem of wars, suffering and equal distribution of wealth, the ecology will always be far from getting proper attention and being considered as priority. We destroy our environment only because we can. And we don’t think about ecology unless we are forced to or tempted by it’s popularity. What we have done for last century to make humanity happier seems extremely difficult to estimate.”²⁵ We know what the problems are, we know how to solve them and yet we chose not to. Why do individuals cease to be concerned about the environment and ecology? What are the factors that lead to negligence of environment problems? As we have seen there are certainly a few explanations for such a state of matters. One is that unfortunately as individuals as well as societies we are selfish entities and no matter how altruistic we may consider ourselves to be, we tend to value our own existence and wellbeing over what we perceive as others or entities we don’t identify with. Understanding ourselves as we are would probably be the essential truth to build a working ecological theory on. Since this is the only way to notice that our individual wellbeing in most

²⁵ David L. Barnhill, Roger S. Gottlieb edit. *Deep Ecology and World Religions, New Essays on Sacred Ground* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 246.

cases is based on the wellbeing of other members of the society we live in and also of other beings of the environment that sustains our lives. We just need to open our eyes to this truth, we need to open ourselves to experiences that can make us realize it.

Do we need to get pragmatic about ecology? It really depends on what aims we set. It is interesting to see that countless books and articles about ecology are extremely reluctant to set any specific goals for our ecological action. But as long as we don't clarify where is it that we are going, we won't be able to chose the right way and all the efforts we make will not go beyond the scope of theoretical discussions about meanings of certain terms, including the term of ecology itself. There is no way to say if ecology sinking deeper and deeper in countless theoretical comparisons with every possible "ism" will be able to protect itself as a legitimate system of values, and after a while we won't be able to recognize or remember what was it about in the first place.

Jordan Paper in his article about Chinese Religion and ecology was right pointing out that "Chinese theorizing proceeds from real problems by developing means for resolving those specific problems. To the contrary, Western theorizing tends to proceed from ad hoc premises to create theories only tangentially related to the problems to which they may be applied."²⁶ Shugendō may be the only religion that can help us to understand the importance of individual experience of being within the natural environment and enlightenment that can be achieved through conscious active practices within such.

For professional theoreticians it doesn't matter if what they write has any influence on what will happen with our attitude and actions towards the environment, since the purpose of academic research in the humanities ceased to have any practical applications quite a long time ago. That is all right for academics, since having an article or book published seems to exhaust any expectations concerning the scope of influence their writing may have. However with religion it should not be the case, since it is supposed to be incomparably closer related to our lives than the academia. Writing about Shugendō also needs to be warranted by conveying understanding, that the theoretical analysis and explanations are far from being the purpose or conclusion of the writing effort, they are merely some signposts and suggestions that require experience and actions in order to be understood. Thus, before engaging in any discussions about the environment and ourselves in it, it would be advisable to have a look and experience the relation of the two as it was and could be before civilization started to play essential part in life of every and each individual and whole societies. Through most of the history

²⁶ David L. Barnhill, Roger S. Gottlieb edit. *Deep Ecology and World Religions, New Essays on Sacred Ground* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 107–108.

of the humanity, we have had scarce influence on the large scale changes in our environment. But once we get the power to do something we immediately tend to abuse it. In our utilization of technology we have developed not always proper reasons and goals are in place.

And finally we also need to understand that there is a limit to how much a person is able to consume, it is how much one can eat and drink, how many pairs of shoes can one put on and how many cars one can drive. Our consumption abilities are as limited as the resources we have, so let us not continue deceiving ourselves that there are no boundaries. There is an old Japanese saying “*Okite hanjō, nete ichijō*” which means that when we are awake, we take a space of a size of half of *tatami*²⁷ mat, and when we are asleep, we take a space of one *tatami* mat, that is as far as our real needs go. And practicing Shugendō in the mountains one may experience how true it is.

Summary

When thinking about religion and ecology, or ecology alone, we need to develop theories which are based on real assessments and propose workable solutions. One of the most serious problems we face is how religions are responsible for the current state and how can they contribute to solving ecological problems. In this short article we try to show that Shugendō, an over 1300 year-old Japanese religious movement, because of its unique fusion of various teachings and practice, may offer a missing element that could make ecological theories applicable and workable to the real life. The essential part of Shugendō's practices are mountain pilgrimages that offer an original and sound opportunity of rethinking man's relation to the environment and help to realize the intrinsic interdependence of man and all other beings that constitute and share the same environment. This experience though religious in its character has consequences to ecological attitudes that exceed the limits of any particular religion and may have great influence on how we behave and treat the environment in everyday life, beyond the sphere of applicability of religious teachings. And finally, Shugendō can also help us to close the gap between the development of ecological theories and revision and modification of daily choices and behaviors of individuals, to bear positive consequences on the environments that sustain their existence.

Key words: Shugendō, Ōmine, ecology, religion, deep ecology, Christianity, Buddhism, Japanese thought

²⁷ *Tatami* is a rice straw mat used for flooring in traditional Japanese houses. The size is about 90 cm x 180 cm, slightly different depending on the region of the country.

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