

Upāya and Idols

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In his book, Professor Gordon Kaufman says, "The fundamental theological task, as well as our most profound and difficult human task, is to distinguish between God and idols."¹ This statement even illuminates a Buddhist "theology." Although the term "God" here refers to the God in the Western culture, the idea of God can plausibly be applied to the "monotheistic" Buddha called Amida of the Pure Land tradition. In its long history, the "Amida cult" in Indian Buddhism has been developed in various ways. Ultimately, it was transmitted as far as Japan. Many Japanese Buddhists monks have made efforts to construct a theology of Amida. Above all, Shinran (1173-1263) refined the traditional "theology" of Amida Buddha into a radical "monotheistic" soteriology.² The characteristic of his soteriology lies in his philosophical clarification of the relationship between the truth, i.e., Amida Buddha, and its revelation, in which he found the important roles of revelatory mediums and idols.

Although applying the idea of God to Amida Buddha is a plausible and interesting task, I will focus my attention on the roles of *upāya* and idols to understand the Christian theological thinking. These terms will be defined in the course of my discussion on Shinran's thought. By means of these notions of *upāya* and idols, the discussion will move on to the several stances of Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich,³ Gordon Kaufman,⁴ and Sallie McFague.⁵ In so doing the significant roles of *upāya* and idols in their relations to ultimate reality, God or Amida Buddha, will become clear for not only Buddhists but also Christian theologians.

In Buddhist history, the Sanskrit term "*upāya*" has been interpreted in multifarious ways. Its original meaning is "coming near," "approaching," and later it came to be understood

as "means," "expediency."⁶ Among many interpretations of the term, Shinran's interpretation, as it appears in his *nembutsu* teachings, is the most suggestive for understanding the relationship between God and idols.

I. UPĀYA AND IDOLS IN NEMBUTSU AND JESUS CHRIST

Nembutsu is a traditional Buddhist practice where devotees utter the name of Amida Buddha in order to be born in the Pure Land, the realm of Amida Buddha. But Shinran's characteristic interpretation of the *nembutsu* is to attribute it completely to Amida Buddha's practice. In other words, he insists that it is impossible for humans to be born in the Pure Land by means of uttering it. Humans are so perverted that they have no ability or possibility to be born in the Pure Land by themselves. Shinran, however, admits the important significance of human utterance of the *nembutsu* when he calls it *upāya*. When Amida Buddha uses *upāya*, it refers to Amida Buddha's "means" of saving humans. Utterance of the *nembutsu* is not a device for humans to rely upon in order to enter into the realm of the truth. It is, rather, the medium for Amida Buddha to reveal him/herself in order to save all sentient beings, including humans. In addition, Shinran has insight into the devotees' inextricable attachment to the *nembutsu* as their own means to be born in the Pure Land. The attachment to the *nembutsu* is an outcome of the self-striving understanding of it. Human utterance of the *nembutsu*, without an exception, is none other than human effort. Although it is futile for humans to consummate their volition for birth in the Pure Land by the *nembutsu* as their own means, still they cannot but utter the *nembutsu* because the name of Amida Buddha is the only way for them

to have contact with the Buddha. Thus, the *nembutsu* utterance itself turns into an end as well as the means for humans. When the *nembutsu* as the *upāya* for Amida is mistaken as the devotees' divine end, we can call it an "idol."

Here it cannot be emphasized enough that, in Shinran's position, *upāya* and idols are all in one and the same *nembutsu*. It is impossible for humans to discern whether the very sound, "*Namo-Amida-butsu* (I take refuge in Amida Buddha)" uttered by humans, is an *upāya* or an idol. That is to say, it is neutral. However, to those uttering the *nembutsu*, it is always an idol. Yet, the *nembutsu*, at the same time, is an *upāya* for Amida Buddha. In actuality, Amida Buddha reveals him/herself to humans through idols as *upāya*. But it is impossible for humans to transform idols into *upāya*. Only Amida Buddha can utilize idols as revelatory *upāya*. In this sense, idols can approach the *upāya* endlessly but cannot reach it.

The revelation of the truth is necessarily mediated by *upāya*. It is quite possible, in my opinion, that idols cannot be the truth but that they can be absorbed by the revelatory *upāya*. The reason for this is that the truth presupposes something finite through which the truth reveals itself. Idols and the *upāya* are identical in that both of them belong to the finite order. However, we must pay careful attention to the fact that the mediums, which can be either idols or *upāya*, on the contrary, do not necessarily presuppose the truth.

It is interesting to see in Tillich a similar structure of *upāya* and idols in this sense.

Every revelation is mediated by one or several of the mediums of revelation. None of these mediums possesses revelatory power in itself; but under the conditions of existence these mediums claim to have it. This claim makes them idols.⁷

What Tillich calls mediums refers to the locus of revelation, that is, *upāya*, and the mediums turn to be idols when they are elevated to "the dignity of the revelation itself."⁸ The similarity between Shinran and Tillich also lies in that both of them deal with idols always along with revelatory mediums or *upāya*, not with God.

Although Tillich presents the idea of idols in relation to mediums of revelation in general, he discusses Jesus the Christ as the final revelation: "the decisive, fulfilling, unsurpassable revelation."⁹ Next, let us see how Tillich distinguishes Jesus as the Christ from idols.

According to Tillich, every revelation is conditioned by the mediums in and through which it appears, but the mediums, as they are, cannot be holy unless they negate themselves in pointing to the divine.¹⁰ In the same vein, for Jesus of Nazareth to be the bearer of the final revelation, he must have the power of negating himself without losing himself. For Tillich the distinction between Jesus the Christ and the idols is consummated through the death of Jesus on the cross as the negation of his own finite condition. In other words, since his disciples tried to make him an object of idolatry, Jesus of Nazareth became the Christ by conquering his finitude on the cross. But there is a pitfall for Tillich because Jesus Christ who accepted his crucifixion two thousands years ago may become a new idol.

We come to know that Jesus Christ and the *nembutsu* are very similar to each other in that they can both function as *upāya* and idols. Unlike Jesus Christ, however, the *nembutsu* which is not a historical person cannot negate itself. But this task of negation in pointing to the divine/ultimate reality must be achieved in the *nembutsu* as well in some way. As we have seen, the *nembutsu* is always an idol for humans insofar as they are attached to it as the means for birth in the Pure Land. This attachment is rooted in the human volition to be born there. In Shinran, what those who utter the *nembutsu* need to do in order to eliminate their volition to be born there is to hear, in the *nembutsu*

("I take refuge in Amida Buddha"), Amida Buddha's summoning for them to come to the Pure Land.¹¹ In so doing, they are to empty the "I" in the *nembutsu* utterance. Then the *nembutsu* becomes *upāya* exclusively.

The "negation", therefore, is being performed not by the *nembutsu* but by humans in striving to eliminate their self-centered volition aiming at their own interests. In the same way, for Jesus Christ who died on the cross to be a real Christ for Tillich in the twentieth century, the Jesus Christ must be incessantly crucified in Tillich himself.

II. UPĀYA AND IDOLS IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES TODAY

In contrast to Tillich, Kaufman and McFague are more concerned with the relationship between God and humans, that is, the world than with Jesus Christ. The characteristic of their theologies lie in criticizing and rethinking the traditional interpretations of doctrines and dogma. For Kaufman, "Christ" refers to the complex of salvific events around and including the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, images of community as the Christian paradigm are considered to be "more appropriate for finding and representing the normatively human than any image of an individual can ever be."¹² On this basis, Kaufman argues the necessity of the communities of "genuine equality, freedom, and love,"¹³ in which none are dominating or oppressing the others. It is for this reason that he needs to seek out the way we construct such communities in relation to the concept of God. In so doing, he is more interested in the fundamental theological task to distinguish between God and idols.

As for McFague, on the ground that a mythology of the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ is no longer credible to us moderns, she understands the mythology as the expression of the promise of God to be permanently present to us in all empirical time and place of our world.

Although her metaphorical theology, at first glance, seems similar to Kaufman's, we find a fundamental chasm between them when we apply the notions of *upāya* and idols to their theologies. It is meaningful to see how the two theologies understand God's revelation without putting an emphasis on the traditional revelatory agent. We will, first, look at Kaufman's theology and, then, turn to McFague's.

A. CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW UPĀYA AND NEW IDOLS

As the very basis of monotheism, the idea of God has been variously formulated in order to express that God is the ground and foundation of everything that exists, and therefore there can be nothing behind or beyond God. The most succinct characterization of God's transcendence was given by Anselm, "God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived."¹⁴ There are two major functions of God as an ultimate point of reference. As Kaufman maintains, God is, on the one hand, considered to be the "humanizing center of orientation,"¹⁵ who brings about human salvation and is usually conceived in anthropomorphic images. But, on the other hand, God is mysterious and beyond all human knowing, or the "relativizer" of everything human and definite. It is, thus, only in relation to God that genuine human salvation is to be found while, at the same time, God is conceived to be radically transcendent and independent of all human striving and desiring. These functions, humanizer and relativizer, are interrelated. If either of them is taken without the other, it would ultimately lose the function and significance of God as the object of human devotion and service.

Based on Anselm's characterization of a monotheistic God and God's function, Kaufman would argue the difference between God and idols. First of all, God is the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else is grasped, whereas idols are within the finite order. Secondly, God is humanizer and, at the same time, relativizer, whereas

idols are among those relativized by God and do not bring about full humanization. Thirdly, God is the one who unmasks all idols, showing them to be unreliable shams.

It is true that a monotheistic God can distinguish Godself from idols owing to God's characteristic, but precisely because "God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived" by humans, God's distinction between Godself and idols is absolutely irrelevant to humans. Is it not the case that what theology needs to do is to articulate the way by which humans come to know the distinction? The key to the answer of this question is alluded by the point that "the idea of the finite and the idea of God are correlative and interdependent parts of a conceptual whole,"¹⁶ and that "therefore the full significance of either of these ideas cannot be grasped apart from the other."¹⁷ Kaufman considers idolatry in the following way.

To give the expressions and constructions of earlier generations such authoritative and uncriticizable standing — once we have recognized that this is what we are doing — is out-and-out idolatry, an intolerable position for a theology seriously attempting to speak of God.¹⁸

If the human construction of the concept of God is the continuous criticism and reassessment of idols including previous or received notions of God, this construction itself will become the construction of a new *upāya*. Thus the concept of God, as Kaufman puts it, functions as a "limiting idea"¹⁹ or as "the idea of something which can only be approached but never actually reached, certainly not surpassed."²⁰ The concept of God, therefore, is that which functions to present the relationship between *upāya* and idols. In short, for humans to

distinguish between God and idols does not lie in their discursive epistemology but is the existential act of their incessant self-criticism based upon God's relativizing function.

B. THE WORLD AS *UPĀYA* IRRELEVANT TO IDOLATRY

In a similar way to Kaufman, McFague, in her metaphorical theology, considers idolatry to be the patriarchal, hierarchical, triumphalist model of relationship between God and the world, which excludes "the emergence of other models to express [appropriately] the relationship between God and the world."²¹ Her main concern is how we should understand the presence of God in order to empower a "destabilizing, inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of fulfillment for all of creation."²² Her own answer to this question is, for example, to present the experiment with the metaphor of the world as God's body along with the personal agential metaphors such as God as mother, lover, and friend on the basis of the paradigm of the cross of Jesus.

McFague, it seems, begins her heuristic, metaphorical theology with her own understanding of the passion narrative of Jesus. In sharp contrast to Tillich's interpretation that Jesus Christ needs to conquer his finitude in order to affirm himself as the Christ, she interprets the narrative to be, "human beings killed their God in the body of a man [Jesus]".²³ She needs to do so because, in order to develop her experiment with the metaphor of the world as God's body, she cannot avoid dealing with the evils we humans have created in our world such as the nuclear issues. In other words, we humans have put the world at risk just as we did against Jesus two thousand years ago. The metaphor of the world as God's body is the remythologization of Jesus' passion narrative. She insists that we humans, as co-workers of God, must take responsibility to care for the "incarnate God,"²⁴ i.e., our world.

In the metaphor of the world as God's body, the world itself could be *upāya* in the sense of the incarnation of God. But this *upāya* of the world is imperfect. As we have seen in both Shinran and Tillich, *upāya* is affirmed necessarily through negation. Kaufman also, in my opinion, implies the human construct of the concept of God as the perennial construction of an ever new *upāya*, in which the continuous criticism and reassessment of the finite including *upāya* are achieved by humans on the basis of God's relativizing function. In contrast, the world as the incarnate God is a straightforward affirmation of the world without going through any notion of negation or criticism. It is true that McFague discusses the evil in the world, but all evil, as she claims, "is not a power over against God."²⁵ It is part of God's being, and it does not function as that which can negate the world as a whole.

Furthermore, what she calls "idolatry," that is to say, the patriarchal, hierarchical, triumphalist model of God is not a real idolatry from Kaufman's point of view. The reason for this is that the hierarchical model of God is just an example antagonistic to her theology. In other words, her thesis can be argued without discussing an "idolatrous" model of God. Kaufman's theology, on the contrary, though he claims the same notion of idolatry as McFague's, develops its thesis along with the criticism of the idolatry as an indispensable element.

III. CONCLUSION: THREE MOMENTS IN THE TENSION BETWEEN *UPĀYA* AND IDOLS

We have seen how the notions of *upāya* and idols based on Shinran's thought are applicable to Christian theologies. Tillich and Shinran are very similar to each other in that both of them consider idols along with the phase of revelation of the ultimate reality. Tillich, however, must bridge

the gap between the traditional Christian scheme and Tillich himself who lives in the twentieth century by giving rise to the tension between Jesus Christ who conquered his finitude on the cross and Jesus Christ who becomes a new idol.

Kaufman's theology is much freer than Tillich's because, as a premise, Kaufman has to scrutinize and criticize every doctrine for concept which is taken for granted and regarded as authoritative. His theology provides us with a wider perspective to rethink the concept of human as well as the concept of ultimate reality regardless of form of monotheism. He, in a sense, seems to be criticizing our mind which tends to seek out a clearly defined understanding of religious symbols like "God." His main theological task, to distinguish between God and idols, therefore, must be worked out not in the humans' discursive epistemology but in existential act of their incessant self-criticism based upon God's relativizing function.

Although McFague elaborates to provide us with the more appropriate metaphors of God's salvific activity, she essentially lacks the point of view that the revelatory mediums and idols are one and the same. In short, her position is, to the end, dualistic in reference to the crucial phase of salvation. In my opinion, there is no objective idolatry irrelevant to our own concept of God. For McFague, the elimination of the patriarchal model of God is one thing, and promotion of the heuristic model of God is another. All we need to do is to seek out a dialectic way to reconciling the two irrelevant stances which McFague is arguing.

We come to know from the scrutiny thus far that the tension between *upāya* and idols has three moments: 1. *upāya* and idols are essentially one neutral thing symbolized by such things as the *Nembutsu*, Jesus of Nazareth, the concept of God, and so on. 2. Idols can approach *upāya* but they cannot reach it. Yet, *upāya* is always an idol for humans. 3. Through negation idols are turned into *upāya*.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 17.

2. Shinran wrote many articles on his teachings. The most important writing is *A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment of Pure Land Buddhism*, ed. Mitsuyuki Ishida, trans. Hisao Inagaki, et al., Ryukoku Translation Series, vol. 5 (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1966).

3. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), vol. 1.

4. Kaufman, *op. cit.*

5. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

6. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), p. 215.

7. Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

11. Shinran, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

12. Kaufman, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

19. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 13.

20. Kaufman, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

21. McFague, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 75.