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Philosophy of Religion of Saint John Baptist De La Salle and its Development

A French priest, Saint John Baptist De La Salle is well known for having devised an education system for the poor children of France and many schools and teachers follow his practices nowadays. His Christian educational ideas and practice are philosophy and even in today's modern education, they still develop. While he was still alive, he built fifty free schools in France and now, the new congregation he began the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, also known today as the De La Salle Brothers in the U.K., Ireland, Poland, Australasia and Asia, the new order he began, is pursuing his life's work.

De La Salle Brothers have about a thousand schools in eighty countries all over the world. De La Salle's spirit and passion are beyond borders and time. In Japan, we have high schools in Hakodate and Kagoshima (Hakodate La Salle High School and Kagoshima La Salle High School both have junior high schools.) and they have gained a high reputation. We also have a welfare institution for children in Sendai (Welfare Institution for Children La Salle Home). Saint John Baptist De La Salle's life, passion for education, love for people and incredible patience touch our hearts. His religious and educational philosophies are based on Christianity, however these are also spread out to Asian and Buddhist countries. The universality arises

from De La Salle's deep and wide view of humanity and the center of it is "the philosophy of courtesy which is an external expression of the respect for God". Respecting teachers and students is necessary for education and the reason is for the honor to God. Historically, such ideas of respect and courtesy came from Confucius. De La Salle's "religious philosophy of courtesy" leads to Confucian "philosophy of courtesy" and here is a strong reason why De La Salle's educational philosophy is accepted among Asian countries. Today, the synthesis of European philosophy and Asian philosophy is one of the challenges, but De La Salle is a pioneer in this field. We shall see how his philosophy and educational practice were great from my viewpoint, *Philosophy of Nothingness and Love* with admiration for De La Salle's accomplishments. It would be a beacon of philosophy in the 21st century's education.

Saint De La Salle's Life; success and failures

De La Salle was born in 1651, in France as the first and oldest son of a Judge of Reims. According to a book [Ishii, 2004: 36] of Kyouichi Ishii who is a Brother of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, De La Salle was just an ordinary boy and used to be well provided for. Today, a Judge's family ranks high among government officials and as a wealthy family. Both of his parents were Catholic and his father, Louis De La Salle always sat in the front row of the church and memorized all the priest's prayers. His mother, Nicolle Moët de Brouillet was also faithful and invested her love in De La Salle. De La Salle accepted Jesus as his savior and entered the university of Reims theological course to become a priest. Then he studied at a theological school in Paris. De La Salle advanced to become a priest smoothly but when he was twenty, he faced the difficulty of the loss his parents. His father was forty-seven and his mother was thirty-eight at that time and both of them died of disease. De La Salle was only twenty and had to support his six brothers and sisters. There is a similarity between great philosophers who lost their parents early such as Confucius in China and Muhammad in Arabia.

De La Salle was back to Reims and kept studying and completed his theological studies by correspondence course while taking care of his family. He was ordained a priest on April 9, 1678 at the age of twenty-seven. During these hard times, Canon Nicolas Roland who was strongly interested in charities and free education encouraged and supported De La Salle. Canon Nicolas Roland started a free school for girls in Reims, France, but he died in 1678 and his school was left to De La Salle. Then Mrs. Maillefer, a relative, and Mrs. Lévesque des Croyères, who was seriously ill and her days were numbered, suggested to De La Salle to go to education. Adrien Nyel who brought a letter from Mrs. Maillefer met De La Salle in Reims, about the establishment of a school in that city. This is why a free boy's school was opened. However Adrien was chosen as the school secretary-general, but didn't know so much about education. He was able to gather some teachers but unable to train them. Then teachers did not graduate from universities or colleges and were not trained on how to teach students. De La Salle had to train the teachers at first.

Gathered young men were just a group of ordinary men, barely literate and often very rough. These young men were lacking in courtesy. Courtesy was like a right of involvement in a society [Ishii, 2004: 39] and people, who lacked it, were not recognized as a member of society. In the age of Louis XIV, it was Christianity to get a footing in courtesies in European society and it was provided with details such as attitude of prayer, speech, ceremonial outfits and decorations as "human's expression of honor to God". These manners influenced the manner of knights and the court. Also, this point relates to Confucius attitude and manners of respect. De La Salle had good manners as a priest but it was frustrating for him to see young people with no manners. Therefore he called young men to his house and they lived together. Naturally his family was against him and finally De La Salle rented two houses and started living with the young men. Young men lived strictly, in the same fashion as religious or monks, and some of them ran away and at times there were only two people left. However De La

Salle's precepts were spreading and the number of young men grew gradually.

Soon De La Salle had to make a radical decision. It was the youth's future. The school was free so it had no income and the young people working with him were worried because there was no guarantee for a secure living for their future. De La Salle introduced and expostulated the Bible to them :

'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow or reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more valuable than they?. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.' [Matthew 6. 26-34 *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version Collins' Clear-Type Press, New York and Glasgow, 1971].

However the young men said "Father De La Salle, we have no possession and we are used. But you are a landlord of the Salle's and a member of Reims. You have a large track of land by inheritance and a big house. More, you are receiving a salary as a church Canon. Therefore you have a guarantee for secure living and no financial worries. But how do you think about us?" [Ishii, 2004: 65].

De La Salle renounced his property and his priestly career as a Canon to keep working for young people. This event is the same as becoming a priest for Buddha and a renunciation of the post of minister of Justice for the practice of peace by Confucius. Historical great philosophers might have to abandon their honor, position and fortune. In other words, that is to be nothing. However this nothingness is not just nothingness but it leads to infinite possibilities. Therefore Buddha attained enlightenment and Confucius put a great deal of efforts into educating disciples. De La Salle lost his fortune but gained young men who had lots of potentials to be educators and it became the cornerstone of education. In 1684, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was established at Reims and the members were over sixty and their activity was going well.

The school in Reims was favorable but De La Salle was called to administer a school in Paris. The school had about two hundred students but it was in confusion. There was no school timetable and disciplines, they did not teach catechism and finally students started gambling on the playground. I can well imagine it because I also used to teach such students at school. Usually, children who go to free schools belong to poor households. Such parents cannot afford to educate their children and children are not disciplined and act on instinct. Having parents is better than having a single parent. Sometimes some students have a single parent and the parent cannot get up early because of having worked until very late at night. In this case, both parent and children do not have a breakfast and oversleep. In such a living condition, how can children be happy to study at school? They go wild such as talking, humming, making a strange voice, showing derision, even causing property damage and condoning in violence. Even for a priest, it was almost impossible to work together as a priest and a teacher. (In present days, educator is a profession.) Therefore the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools does not have priests because they think it made an important point of being a congregation of only teaching Brothers. However such activity did not go smoothly. De La Salle nominated Brother L'Heureux as superior but the parish-priest did not permit it. There was a difference between a Brother and a priest, and to be the superior of a parish-school and at the same time to be only a brother was not allowed. Brother L'Heureux became the leader of another school in Paris but some senior Brothers who were discontented withdrew [Ishii, 2004: 103-104]

De La Salle was getting popular and opened three more schools. However after coming to Paris, he had urinary retention because of traveling to Reims and back. He was in a serious condition and took a veterinary medicine, then recovered kind of miraculously. In addition, luck was with him. His fame was spread but on the other hand, head wind blew against him. Calligraphy schools and tuition schools teachers accused De La Salle of swindling the people for education, as De La Salle allowed rich children

enter the school, even though he insisted on gathering only poor children in his free schools [Ishii, 2004: 103-104]. De La Salle did not argue against them and finally he lost a law suit. The school was stopped and assaulted. Father De La Chétardie prevented it barely; he was a supporter of De La Salle but also tried to interfere in De La Salle's work. It obviously was in contradiction. In European philosophy, the existence of a contradiction between these two is uncommon. (However a Japanese philosopher, Kitarou Nishida expressed this as self-identity of absolute contradiction and proposed a new logic.) This Father De La Chétardie was allowed to see Louis XIV and it means he was the highest government official who was struggling for power. Among officers, to obey their superior's orders is common knowledge. In contrast to raise objection to a superior means mutiny. If someone did it in present Japan, he or she could be demoted immediately. However De La Salle often raised objections against his superiors and they had an eye on him. The contents of their plan were completely different from De La Salle's from the beginning. De La Salle wanted to start a new education though Father De La Chétardie continued and supported conventional education. Father De La Chétardie was like a high government officer and De La Salle was just a head teacher. No one intervened between the two so Father De La Chétardie presumed De La Salle to be insolent and therefore Father De La Chétardie oppressed De La Salle much more.

The primary oppression was about too strict penance in the religious formation process. The details were unknown but for example, such penance was fasting. According to the book of Mr. Ishii, they aimed to be like the Trappists, which is the strictest monastic order. At first, they had fifteen Brothers but six of them passed away before being thirty years old(8). It was exactly penance because half of the Brothers died as a result of it. Father De La Chétardie cautioned against too much of a strict penance because some Brothers fainted during work, but De La Salle continued it at that time. It showed their serious attitude toward education. As another source of oppression, Brother Michel, training coach, who was the master

of novices, inflicted physical punishment in training Brothers. The novices appealed to Father De La Chétardie. He had tried to pull De La Salle to pieces so he appealed to the archbishop immediately. De La Salle was accused of a lack of leadership and control. Then the Superior of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was also dismissed (1702).

Through such difficulties and oppression, what did De La Salle think about? Not only oppression but also some partners betrayed De La Salle and some influential supporters went away from him. The situation was worse. However these challenges gave huge influences on his ideas and philosophy.

‘So that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.’ (The first letter of Peter, 1. 7, *The Holy Bible*).

Attacks from partners caused more extensive damage than attacks from enemies. Can you imagine how hard enduring oppression from a superior and from partners’ betrayal is? Some people might break down but De La Salle did not. He did not give up on education. Rather oppression and betrayal made him stronger and inspired his passion for education, his ideas and philosophy. The more difficulties he was faced with, the stronger he became. Through the difficulties, he emitted the light of diamond over gold and silver. De La Salle who had renounced his property then lost his job, lost the legal suit, was forced to stop educational activities and he faced nothingness. However this was not just nothingness but it leads to infinite and eternal shine. According to “the principle of nothingness and love” [Ishii, 2004: 91-95], nothingness leads to infinity, eternity, the transcendent Being which is God, and to love - a continuing process. This principle applies to De La Salle’s life as well as Christ. Christ also experienced nothingness and proved the eternal life. Then he was lifted up eternally and infinitely.

‘Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing

to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name.' (The letter of Paul to the Philippians, 2.5-9, *The Holy Bible*)

Also De La Salle was in nothingness, but he gained energy which leads to infinity and eternity and then his name gets higher and higher. Therefore De La Salle did not get desperate and did not give up on doing when he was faced with so many difficulties. He did not resist either. Even as he was accused, he did not appear in court and left the judges decide. Also he did not protest Father De La Chétardie, nor struggle, De La Salle invested his energy in opening schools. For De La Salle, the joy of opening schools was much bigger than pains. He opened schools in the North; Reims, Chartres, Rouen, and Versailles in the South; Avignon, Marseille, Grenoble. In Paris, no one supported De La Salle but in the South of France, he received a warm welcome. Finally in 1712, he moved to the South of France to escape from persecution. At that time, people in the South of France had a strong accent and it was as if he lived in a foreign country. That is why De La Salle turned his passion to building schools there. He had trouble with the language but had no trouble with ties or persecution like in Paris, and his education was steadily spreading. However there were the Camisards in the South of France, protestants who rebelled against the abolition of Edict of Nantes, and they conflicted with Louis XIV. Even Louis XIV could not put down the rebellion. But De La Salle went there and educated children no matter what they believed. It shows his brotherhood supported different faiths and this same passion and respect of others developed till today all over the world including Eastern countries such as Japan.

In the South of France, De La Salle was welcomed and it seemed all settled but the unexpected was to happen. He was misunderstood as a believer of Jansenism, which was pronounced as a heresy by the Pope Innocent X in 1655. Its theological origin was from Augustinus and it emphasized the original sin of man. The base of its activities was Port-Royal-des-

Champs in Paris. It is very famous that in the history of philosophy, Blaise Pascal wrote *Pensées* there. Of course Pascal supported Jansenism. Therefore the theological base was solid. It spread in France widely. One of De La Salle's own brother believed in it, then De La Salle was doubted as a member of Jansenism. De La Salle's schools were oppressed as anti-Papal and anti-Louis XIV. His friend, Brother Ponce criticized De La Salle and left. His pupils also turned their back on De La Salle and surprisingly, one of the Brothers in his house, asked De La Salle for room rates. It is like a lodger requesting the charge from a landlord. Therefore, De La Salle had to leave the Brothers' house. Fortunately, a small Christian group called Women's Community of Christianity fixed him up. In De La Salle's life, women or convents sometimes supported him. Especially in the spring of 1714, when he was afflicted with rheumatism and was persecuted, he was welcomed on the hill of Parménie, in the suburbs of Grenoble which was in safe South France. He was in a serious crisis, so De La Salle looked back over his life. "I threw all my property away and lived my life for education. But was it right?" This is like Confucius's great hesitation. Later De La Salle met Sister Louise who was uneducated but very holy, and she said, "Do not abandon your family in God. Education needs you." [Nakatomi, 2002: 377-383]. By this short conversation with Sister Louise, he was very encouraged and inspired. He was so shocked and it was as philosophical intuition. In addition, at that time De La Salle received a letter from the Brothers in Paris requesting him to return to Paris. It said "Father De La Salle, in 1694, you swore loyalty to God and the Institution of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Hence in the name of it, we would like you to continue to take charge of the whole Institution of the Brothers of the Christian Schools." [Ishii, 2004: 156].

It means De La Salle's project was accepted and appreciated. It was a huge reversal. Still more, the harshest persecutor, Father De La Chétardie, had died, so De La Salle went back to Paris and reorganized the Institution of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and in 1717, opened a general meeting in Reims, which elected Brother Barthélémy, as Superior General.

Then De La Salle made sure the foundation of the Institution of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In 1719, De La Salle worn out by hard work and austerities gave thanks to God and was raised to the skies peacefully. He lived a stormy life but never gave up on God and his philosophy was not unshakeable. Then we will research the core of his philosophy.

Religious philosophy of courtesy

Mr. Kyouichi Ishii researched about comparative studies in history between Japan and France. His research is very interesting and probably no one has ever done this before. De La Salle is not so familiar to Japanese, so to compare the life of De La Salle with the history of Japan in the Edo era is easier for Japanese to understand. De La Salle's book about courtesy was at the top of the bestsellers list at that time in Europe. It shows his idea of courtesy was very strong and had great support. Needless to say, De La Salle had his own philosophy and Mr. Ishii studies the comparison of philosophy between De La Salle and Ekiken Kaibara, who was a Japanese Neo-Confucianist scholar, philosopher and botanist in the Edo era. The research is independent so I do not mention it. Ekiken Kaibara is influenced by Confucian ideas. I propose to seek the source of Confucius' ideas and study about De La Salle's philosophy of courtesy then I want to spread his idea. I have already written about Confucius in my book, *Philosophy of Nothingness and Love*, chapter 8 and two papers [Ishii, 2004: 157]. From this point, I want to argue about it.

Well, De La Salle's philosophy of courtesy is a respect for God and people. On the other hand, the courtesy of Confucius is an external expression of benevolence. Generally speaking, the idea of Confucius denied superstitious and traditional gods. Truly he recognized and stood in awe of heaven. In ancient China, there were an idea of "Heaven" as the flow of life that controls all things in the universe and it included Gods of nature or Gods of ancestors. Then Confucius also revered the "heaven" and this is the most famous part;

The Master said, ' I am thinking of giving up speech.' Tzu-kung said, ' If you did not speak, what would there be for us, your disciples, to transmit? ' The Master said, ' what does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say? ' (The *Analect* -19, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books 1979)

The meaning of the sentence is that Heaven says nothing. In ancient China, Heaven was the transcendent Being which controls the movement of the world with infinite power like the archetype. It is nothingness as reality. Confucius recognized the existence of heaven and that heaven says nothing. He knew by intuition nothingness. Confucius lost his favorite pupils and son and he could not express the emotion of his great loss and disappointment. Traditionally, the idea of nothingness came from Lao-Tzu, Chuang-Tzu. Chuang-Tzu learned Confucianism. Therefore it is possible that the idea of nothingness came from Confucius to Chuang-Tzu. In addition the idea of heaven and this intuition of nothingness leads to the intuition of God.

In Christianity, probably no one sees God who controls all things in the universe and transcends human beings, called Yahweh. In other word, He is the transcendent Being so it is very close to Heaven in Chinese philosophy because both of them are beyond the boundary of human knowledge. Moreover, the transcendent Being is beyond language, so we can call it 'nothingness'. Through this idea, we can connect the God of Christianity and Heaven in Chinese philosophy. More, it also applies to the Islamic God, Allah and any other God in the world. For instance, Allah is so great that man cannot express him by words, he is beyond words. Therefore Allah is nothingness. I proved it in my papers [Nakatomi, 2006]. I call it "the principle of nothingness and love" but actually through this principle, it applies not only to religions but also to physics, biology, political science, economics and other branches of knowledge(International Society for Universal Dialogue (USA, Emporia University)).

In conclusion, by using the idea of heaven and nothingness, De La Salle and Confucius connect each other. The important point of Confucius is rite that is to respect each other and De La Salle also respected people and God. In that respect, both are very similar.

The Rite of Confucius is still practical in present Japan. 「Stand up!, Bow!」 is the most familiar habit in Japan. Ceremonial occasions are also influenced by Confucianism. Confucius was an orphan and he was brought up in a funeral parlor so he was well educated through learning the manners for funerals or offerings. He worked as an inferior officer so he actually needed to educate himself. Rite is not formal but has a very important meaning of benevolence. The essence of rite is a model of judo.

Yen Yüan asked about benevolence. The Master said, ' To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his. However, the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on other.'

Yen Yüan said, ' I should like you to list the items. ' The Master said, ' Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites.'

Yen Yüan said, ' Though I am not quick, I shall direct my efforts towards what you have said.' (*The Analects 1*)

Here, there is no difference between benevolence and rite. These are two different expressions but the principles are the same. How can we rely on others for benevolence? That is nonsense if we do not practice our own. The principle of benevolence is subjective. When Yen Yüan asked Confucius about an important point, Confucius answered that is not to look, hear, say and act departed things from rite. In other words, that is to unify all emotions and behavior with rite. Confucius preaches how to practice rite and benevolence, that we should always tense our sense, our every moves and behaviors. The spirit is the same as that of De La Salle. De La Salle

mentions how to walk, talk, eat, drink and all these are recorded in some writings. De La Salle advised colleagues not to walk swinging their arms in town and directed them how to walk with good posture. He paid attention to the appearance in public view. In addition he thought posture and walking did show the person's heart and attitude towards life. Also De La Salle provided a dress code for the institution of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. It helped for the public to see who belonged to it. Unless they did not wear such a dress, that was different from that of priests, they could not show independent activities to the public. De La Salle always tried to spread his organization.

Conclusion

De La Salle's philosophy of courtesy applies to modern education and we can learn so many things from it. For example, stand up and bow before a class. It still works in present Japan. Some schools do casual sitting bow but still standing up and bowing is popular. When a class starts, students say "Onegai shimasu" in Japanese, it means 'Please give us good teaching.' And at the end of class, they say "Arigatou gozaimashita" in Japanese, it means "Thank you very much". Students respect teachers and teachers love students. De La Salle strictly prohibited chatting during class so usually teachers spoke and students listened and took notes quietly. If they had any questions, they raised their hand and asked the teacher. Class unraveling is obviously lacking these two. Shiftless students do not take seats even when the bell has already sounded and they hang around corridors or stairs chatting. They do not draw a line between a class and a break; they sometimes eat sweets or foods and then left trash there. Even when they take seats, they never stop chatting despite the teacher warning them hundreds times. There is no room for improvement. When they are tired of the class, they pretend to go to the restrooms and it is the best excuse to loiter. It disturbs the class so when a teacher expels them, they unite with other students expelled from other classrooms, and they run around the school and finally play soccer or table tennis. It is no longer school. However this

unraveling classes and such schools are not rare in Japan. In such a school, almost no one stands up and bows or keeps quiet. There is a serious drop in scholastic abilities and teachers feel that students going to a higher school are hopeless. It looks like they throw their lives away. Teachers take a long time to decide, and such students drop out and once they do, they become victims of gangs and it is obvious that they will ruin themselves through dissolute lives. Therefore the meaning of a school in such situations might be just an accommodation to keep them. The true victims are half the class' honest students because the class is usually interrupted. While reflecting about such a situation of modern schools in Japan, De La Salle's educational idea of courtesy is not out-of-date. It is not just an ideal, either. De La Salle really understood how important are rules and discipline for young people because he suffered from lawless young adolescents and chaos too. Also his educational theory and philosophy of courtesy lead to Confucius. Both of them abandoned their property and position. Then they put all their hearts into education just because of one reason: brotherhood. Their passion and love for people is still alive today. Now many people fear about the danger of the unraveling Japanese education but De La Salle's philosophy casts a new light on it.

- [1] Ishii, K. 2004. *The man who descended a hill- The Life of Saint De La Salle*, society of De La Salle, alumni association of De La Salle.
- [2] Nakatomi, K., 2006. *Theory of peace of Confucius*. in: *Parerga* No. 2 Warsaw.
- [3] *The man who descended a hill- The Life of Saint De La Salle*, p. 156