

# Methodological Problems in the Sociology of Religion in Japan

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## INTRODUCTION

I find myself in practically complete agreement with the points Bryan Wilson makes in his interesting paper on "The Academic Position of the Sociology of Religion in Modern Science," and there are no statements in it with which I would disagree or entertain doubts. Led by Wilson's arguments, then, I propose to deal here with the methodological problems in the sociology of religion as it is practiced in Japan. By "methodological problems" I mean those problems connected with the approach to the object of study, and in "problems" I would include not only those points of contention that need to be overcome, but also the points that are open to discussion.

In opening such a discussion we must first pin down the actual state of socio-religious research in Japan. This present state is reflected best in the activities of the "Study Group on the Sociology of Religion," which consists mostly of younger scholars (although it seems to include as well a considerable number of people who are no longer so young), but I am not too well acquainted with their research. Even so, in order to put together my essay on this topic, I propose to take as the basis for my discussion the experience and knowledge that I have personally accumulated in my thirty-odd years of research activities. My intention to write on the sociology of religion in Japan in terms of self-criticism and self-confirmation regarding the methodological problems I encountered in my own socio-religious studies may,

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I fear, from lack of adequate preparation become nothing but a comment on my own sociology of religion. If this be the case, I beg the indulgence of my readers.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMPATHETIC DETACHMENT

Wilson stresses the methodology of "sympathetic detachment." Be it "sympathetic," or "emphatic understanding," without such an attitude no deep understanding of the object of study is possible. If, in other words, we turn our backs on sympathy and label religion as superstition, heresy, or even evil, then we will never be able to reach its true nature. Such an investigation of reality would be nothing more than a reaffirmation of our own prejudices. If, however, we do not cling tightly to the views we held before engaging in field research, but rather use them as a working hypothesis open to correction and additions from what we actually see and hear, then it will be possible for us to conduct scientific research. Yet again, if we lack a sympathetic disposition—one which tries to appraise religion not only through the head, but through the heart as well—we are liable to become guilty of a rationalistic bias. We might well be using logic, but we will do no more than formulate an understanding of religion that fails to transmit the heart of its believers.

In this sense, sympathy is a *conditio sine qua non* in religious research. If, however, this is a sympathy with no restraints to it, then there is a danger of falling into an emotional bias and it will become impossible to collect objective information and data that can eventually be translated into sociological language. This is because the difference between sympathy and emotional involvement is but paper-thin. It is, thus, necessary to have some emotional distance from the object of study. It is, however, also quite possible that placing this distance between oneself and the object will entail a rupture of sympathy. In this case sympathy and detachment are in a contradictory tension with one another. It is the synthesis of these two that Wilson calls "sympathetic detachment."

Sympathetic detachment is the basic attitude constantly required for those who would conduct research on the human aspects of social phenomena. There are, of course, fields in which value judgments or feelings of partiality do not arise so easily in the researcher, and in these cases one will not be made to feel a contradiction between sympathy and an objective viewpoint. But in areas that easily stimulate value judgments and personal feelings—for example, those which deal with problems such as crime, sickness, poverty, the family, religion and the like—the requirement of sympathetic detachment becomes all the more significant. It is easy to maintain emotional distance from an object of study which arouses adverse feelings, but sympathy is difficult; when sympathy is lacking, one cannot make interpretations from the position of the object of study, and one's understanding will remain superficial. On the other hand, it is easy to feel sympathy for an object of study which arouses agreeable feelings, but in this case objectivity becomes difficult.

Among these fields in which sympathetic detachment is especially important, religion in particular involves a cultural tradition and constitutes a world of meaning, and is hence likely to arouse within those who come into contact with it strong personal feelings such as like or dislike, or love and hatred, and also to elicit value judgments such as good and bad, true and false, superior and inferior, high-class and low-class, and the like. The need for sympathetic detachment is thus particularly important in the scientific study of religion. This reminds me of the words of E. Renan, in his *Life of Jesus*:

The first prerequisite necessary to write on religious history is to have once believed in the religion—if one has not believed, it would be impossible to know in what way that religion has the power to move and to satisfy the hearts of men—and next, it is necessary that one no longer believes in the absolute power of the religion. This is because a pure faith and a pure history do not go together.

Renan maintains that a scholar is able to be sympathetic be-

cause he has experienced belief in a religion, and that objectivity is possible for him since he is no longer committed to it.

This opinion was appropriate for someone writing the history of Christianity in the Christian world of that time, but nowadays it must be labelled as too narrow even for Western Christian culture, not to mention the Oriental countries in which, according to Wilson, "more diffuse religious attitudes prevail, and in which different religious traditions co-exist, merge, or persist in symbiotic relationship." It is almost tantamount to saying, "You must belong to it (a religion) in order to understand it." Renan's explanation is correct, but is it not possible to reach a sympathetic understanding through personal interviews with believers and participation in their religious observances, even if one has never become a member of the religion one wants to study?

As Wilson points out, we Japanese have here conditions that will help attain sympathetic detachment. There are, however, also people here who strongly believe that their own religion is by far the most superior one, and for these people sympathetic detachment must be an element that is difficult to come to terms with. In this respect it is probably necessary, as Renan says, to not believe in the absolute nature of one's religion, or to cease believing in it at all. Again, even the most sincere observations made by the sociology of religion would unquestionably be seen by avid devotees as lacking something essential, rather like cider that has gone flat. One indeed needs to be self-critical of one's shortcomings regarding any lack of sympathetic understanding, but it is still best to give up any hope of being able to satisfy the avid devotees.

#### THE APPLICATION OF WESTERN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS THEORIES

One characteristic of Japanese sociology of religion—and of other branches of sociology as well—is the serious effort to import theories developed in the West and the subsequent attempt to apply these theories to the analytical understanding of the nature of Japanese society. Efforts to introduce Western theories were especially

prominent in the first stages of the sociology of religion in Japan, and they continue to be seen even now. This special issue on Wilson may be called an example of this.

To learn from the results produced by the leading sociology of the West, and to use these theories to promote sociological analysis in Japan, is without doubt both a meaningful endeavor and a fascinating task. On the other hand, however, to what extent can theories developed by sociologists of countries with different cultural traditions and social structures really be applied to Japan? Such doubts have been raised coincidentally by specialists seriously involved in the realities of Japanese society. This problem had already seized the concern of many people before the war, when the theories of Troeltsch, Weber, Durkheim and others were being introduced one after another.

The cultures of the various countries of the world are all different in quality, but in terms of modern industrial technology it is possible to array them according to the extent of development. The expanding influence of modern industrial technology has been followed by an increasing similarity among differing societies, especially in those sections in which advanced technology has been introduced. For sociological inquiries in areas close to industrial technology, the application of Western theories has thus gained in effectiveness. Industrial sociology is a good case in point. We have seen cases in which some uniquely Japanese features of interpersonal relationships in industry have been elucidated by the application of Western theories. International comparison is possible even in the case of the family, which is an institution that tends to preserve the value system of the traditional culture. Since the family has in its core biological processes such as procreation and the rearing of children, the application of Western theories can be effective for piloting research activities. Thus in many areas of Japanese sociology the introduction and application of advanced Western theories have been successfully attempted, in spite of differences in culture and social structure.

The sociology of religion seems to be somewhat different in this

respect. In the case of discussions of secularization and the like, which do not require concrete verification and can in a sense be called "commentary observations," the European import theories have their uses in explaining Japanese religious changes. When, however, we attempt positive empirical analysis, we must ask ourselves to what extent Western sociology of religion, which has grown from a background of Christian culture, is really appropriate.

Empirical research in the sociology of religion has little interest in the details of reality themselves. Its endeavor is rather toward the very generalization that transcends the individual particularities. Such generalizations are first established at the level of subcultures, then proceed to the stage of higher cultural levels (national or tribal cultures), and then proceed even further to the level of cultural areas which are comprised of a number of related national cultures. The ultimate aim is to produce generalizations that will be valid for differing cultural areas. In this process, comparative research is indispensable in the attainment of a higher level of generalization. At this stage in the process things are, at best, on the level of generalizations or general hypotheses within the Western cultural area, and have yet to transcend that to a higher level of generalization. It is not without reason, then, that many of the theories developed in the West are hardly appropriate for an analysis of Japanese religions.

The following situation has resulted from this. First, we have stopped at the mere introduction and presentation of foreign theories and never gone beyond that. Second, as I noted above, has been the use of recent Western theories for explaining the Japanese religious situation at a dimension that needs no verification or under circumstances where we have abandoned verification. And third, there have been cases of people turning their backs entirely on foreign ideas and immersing themselves in the minute details of field research. Particularly in the first instance, but in the second and third as well, the consequence has been that a deep cleavage has arisen between theory and empirical research.

It goes without saying that our proper role is to stand in the middle, that is, to mediate between theory and empirical study. This means that we should ceaselessly attempt to adapt foreign theories, even when they are difficult to apply as such, and devise means for making them serve as a tool in the analysis of Japan's religious phenomena; additionally, we should attempt to make generalizations from our empirical research, theorize on them, and search for points of meaningful contact with foreign scholarship. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this, at present, is our most urgent task.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH, AND THE PROBLEM OF TERMINOLOGY  
Wilson points out that, clearly, part of the sociologist's work must of necessity be historical. As is well known, this tendency is remarkable in Japan. One cannot, indeed, satisfactorily analyze the contemporary situation of religion if one tries to do so only in terms of the present and ignores the past. Sociological research on religion will hardly have the power to convince us of anything if it has no interest in history and does not make proper use of historical data.

We cannot, however, then say that the sociology of religion is a branch of the history of religion. Historical research aims at elucidating the historical particularities of individual events that can be seen in the development of religions. The sociology of religion, however, aims primarily at generalization and has little interest in the individual particularities. No matter how minutely we might analyze historical data and thereby reconstruct a history laced with particular events, this will serve only as a means for coming to a more general level. Sociology can aptly be referred to as a "distilling science." Historical data are also "distilled," in order to come up with a general formula, and there is no interest in history itself. This is precisely where the sociology of religion differs from the history of religion.

It is easy enough to say this much, but, somehow, when it comes to the actual process of using historical data and ordering

them in a historical context, the distinctions between the sociology and the history of religion become blurred. The problem is further complicated by a misappropriation of the concrete historical terms that appear in the data. It seems to me that it would be possible to avoid even this to a great extent if we would, instead of using concrete historical terms as such, rather translate them into clearly-defined sociological terms (including newly-coined words).

A related problem is that, when reporting on the results of field work conducted for the purpose of collecting contemporary data, we frequently borrow the terms used by the members of the religions we are studying and use them in the same way as they do. This happens because it is a kind of short cut to conveying "sympathy." We cannot deny, however, that these terms are insufficient for expressing our results in a "detached" manner. We must, then, even if we have used the words of the members of the religions we are studying but one time, at least in our conclusions translate them into technical terms, or, if there are no appropriate words available, coin new terms and add, step by step, abstractions to the process. Because the religious phenomena of Japan are unique, it might prove that the terminology of Western scholars is inappropriate, and if this happens there should be no reason that we cannot construct new words that will reflect Japan's cultural characteristics. On the other hand, it might happen that, if we fail to make clear the relative position of new words in terms of existing equal and superior level concepts, we will produce once again an international isolationism on the new level of abstractions we have reached.

A thorough knowledge of the theories and concepts used in the West is required to accomplish such a task, which is something that I, for one, looking back over what has been done, fear may have sometimes been lacking. At the same time, it is also necessary for us to coordinate the findings of the sociology of religion in Japan, to identify the propositions tested or advanced and the main concepts used, and to prepare, so to speak, an inventory

of propositions and concepts. But here, too, I am afraid my knowledge of contemporary Japanese achievements is not as rich as it should be. The recently-produced *Handbook for Research on the New Religions*, edited by the leading members of the "Study Group on the Sociology of Religion" (1981), organizes a body of research results on the new religions and facilitates drawing benefits from this common property. I have hopes that a similar effort will be made to coordinate the results of studies outside the realm of the new religions.

In order to remain a sociological study in spite of the use of historical data, we need to analyze the data and state the findings in sociological terms. The same efforts are also required in reporting the results of fieldwork. Moreover, in order to deal with the peculiar nature of Japan's religious phenomena and hence the objects of our research, we need to be equipped with new terms that can be linked to existing concepts. Japan's proper contributions to the sociology of religion of the world will, I believe, begin from efforts such as these.

#### CONVENTIONAL VERIFICATION AND NEW VIEWS

There is, thus, an obvious need to coin new terms that should reflect the situation unique to Japan. Along with this, however, we must also develop a new type of vision. New views will provide new meaning to existing terms and shed new light on the problems. Accordingly, the development of new views is even more urgent.

As I stated above, the level of generalization rises and the scope of its validity becomes more extensive with the accumulation of comparative research. This is the common way through which inductive theories are derived from empirical research. New angles on the problem, however, are not obtained inductively; they come rather in an *a priori* way to the mind of insightful observers and are applied deductively to reality. Frequently they seem to come like a bolt from the blue while one is studying the views of other disciplines or when one places oneself in an alien

culture. New books produced by Western scholars often set forth new views and contain new results produced by their new approaches. What makes this possible is probably such advantages as a broadly based education that keeps one from becoming overly specialized, an international comparative perspective, and the like.

It is said that Japanese specialists are far too absorbed in the minutiae of their evidence and have been lax in their efforts to open up new views. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to call this an escape into the world of minute points. Younger people, dissatisfied with this state of affairs, are ever pushing forward in quest of original ideas, but I am not aware of anyone's having broken through the boundaries of somewhat sensible comments made in the manner of commentators.

New views mature quietly and then flash upon the mind, and are not things that can be obtained by one who sets out to pursue them. Thus I suggest it is best to first devote oneself to solid empirical research. This does not mean, however, that one should immerse oneself completely in observation and verification. Such continual observation becomes a problem if it means that one has pushed oneself more and more into narrow alleys, having faithfully grasped the fine details but lost sight of one's vision of the whole, simply in order to obtain a more rigorous understanding of the object of research. What is really needed is the type of steady and faithful research in which a minute observation of one small part can be linked to a deeper understanding of the whole.

If one has no revelations of new views, then one will have to choose a research topic on the basis of common sense. When this happens, one's investigation is apt to become a conventional thing that will only reconfirm this common sense. People fascinated by the charm of new views seem to have difficulties with enduring such conventionality and the enormous amount of energy and long periods of time needed to carry out conventional procedures. Unless so-called "common sense" is corroborated by actual proof,

however, we cannot understand the reality of any given situation. Such things as average values, distributions, and factors that affect distributions, for example, only become clear when studied empirically. Even conventional research, such as the "Japanese National Character Survey" held every five years by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, makes, in its own fashion, certain trends more visible. Although there may be some people who can foresee the general tendencies, most cannot, and when it comes to the specific details, most often these cannot be foreseen by anyone. When the same survey is repeated several times, even those investigations that at first seem very conventional will be given an importance that cannot be rivaled. And in the meantime, will the "somewhat sensible comments made in the manner of commentators" not fade totally into oblivion?

This is not to say that I am scorning the development of new views that can involve changes in our very way of thought. Instead, since the development of new views tends to be impeded as one repeats and accumulates solid empirical inquiries, for Japanese sociologists of religion who tend to lean heavily toward field research, I would suggest that it is almost imperative to strive to open the way toward the development of new views. In order to do this, it is necessary for us to avoid the hardening of the arteries and tunnel vision that can accompany a continuous effort at empiricism by studying views developed in related disciplines and conducting comparative research and the like. Further, outspoken criticism from among the specialists in the field can unquestionably become a powerful remedy for these diseases as well.

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up the comments I have made above, stimulated by Wilson's essay, on the methodological problems in the sociology of religion in Japan, I think we must aim at the synthesis or mediation between two tendencies that are essentially in tension. I have noted the following four types of such tensions and syntheses:

first, the synthesis of sympathy and detachment; second, the mutual mediation between theory and empirical research; third, the mediation between historical particularization and supra-historical conceptualization; and fourth, the mediation between common sense investigations and a change in our very way of thought. Points two, three and four are mutually interrelated. Since we have a leaning towards empirical work, history and common sense, and the elements on the opposite end of the spectrum are somewhat weak, it is a matter of some regret that we have not harvested the fruits of mutual mediation. I have touched on some of the directions to be taken to remedy this distortion, but this is not an easy task to accomplish. In the absence of such efforts, in any event, it will remain difficult to bring about the internationalization of the Japanese sociology of religion, no matter how familiar we might be with the literature of the West. It is said that Japanese religions are also entering a period of internationalization. In this case the exact meaning of internationalization is, to be sure, a problem, but whatever it might mean, the internationalization of the sociology of religion is a must. It is with this in mind that I have taken up in this essay some of these fundamental problems.