

## By Way of Introduction

James W. HEISIG

THE THEME OF THIS symposium, “New Directions in Religious Studies,” hardly needs explanation or justification. To those working in any of the manifold of overlapping disciplines concerned with religious phenomena, it is obvious that the subject matter has still got the better of us. After a century of concerted effort, whose published results have long since surpassed in volume the collected religious writings of humanity prior to the establishment of religious studies, our best theoretical constructs are still no match for the complexity and mystery of religion itself. Despite the prying eyes of specialists into its every crease and cranny, despite the criticisms of its harshest critics and the endorsement of its greatest champions, religion remains as resilient a rebuff to rational understanding as any dimension of human culture. It is only natural, particularly at the end of the millennium when religious sentiment can be expected to boil more feverishly than normal, that we stop to think about where we are headed and to assess the alternatives opening up.

At the same time, we are ever more conscious of the fact that it is not enough for scholarly concern to monitor the living religion of the present with the same eye it casts over religion’s historical vestiges and records. Somewhere in the vast academic apparatus of books, journals, departments, curricula of study, and devoted careers—somewhere in all of that there must be an effort by religious studies to exercise control over the excesses of religious fanaticism and to nudge genuine religious enthusiasm closer to the pressing concerns of our age. To speak of new directions in religious studies does not quite make sense without talking of participation in the new directions of religion itself. It is hardly a matter of indifference to human civilization whether living spiritual traditions, whatever the reach of their cultural or institutional influence, turn a deaf ear or an attentive ear to the care of the planet, the threat of modern weaponry, the systematic persecution and enslavement of one political or economic system by another, the truth or falsehood of other religious ways. That some guidance should be expected from the vast army of scholars of religion, distinct from the guidance of religious doctrine itself, is hardly to be wondered at. It has long been self-evident that religious studies needs religion; but only extensive violence in the name of religion seems enough to persuade us that religion needs religious studies. And even then, only to

persuade a few. Surely the time is upon us to pursue more positive and constructive reasons.

The papers that form the basis of the present symposium divide into two approaches represented respectively—though perhaps only coincidentally—by the Japanese and the American participants.

Professors Tsuchiya and Takezawa look to the future of religious studies with an eye to finishing the tasks that the pioneering scholars of religion in the last century left unfinished. While acknowledging the advances that have been made in methodology and the superior resources now at our disposal, each in his own way argues that the history of religious studies is not a history of unqualified progress. Much of what there is to criticize in the present state of the discipline they attribute to the failure to come to terms with fundamental problems of method and focus inherited from the past.

Professors Sullivan and Carrasco, in contrast, try to read future trends in religious studies by looking at what is going on in religion itself. The historical framework in which they move is supplied first and foremost by the subject matter of religious studies, not by the particular development of the discipline itself. The borderlines between religion and the study of religion are less strictly controlled, with the result that the contributions of the scholar to society may at times qualify as a kind of religious act.

The differences between the two approaches reach deeper than the distinction between scientific objectivity and participatory subjectivity is equipped to handle. One cannot read the papers collected here without the sense that the very notion of objectivity itself is never fully objective but always affected by a specific cultural and historical temper. By the same token, the differences are misunderstood if set up as contradictories, or as an unresolvable dilemma that paralyzes religious studies from moving ahead. I am sure it will strike many readers, as it struck me, that the two approaches are rather, hammer and anvil, necessary and complementary tools for shaping into intelligible form anything drawn from the rich forge of religion.

All of this, and more, the two respondents have put more sharply in their respective commentaries on the papers. One could hardly wish for better stimulus to carry the discussion on in symposium.

Clearly choices are going to be made by ours and the next generation of scholars of religion with regard to which trends to pursue, which to leave to others, and which to resist as unsuited to the business of religious studies. If the present symposium can shed at least a few rays of light on those choices, then it shall have fulfilled its purpose. On behalf of Nanzan University and the organizing committee of the 58th annual meeting of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, I wish to thank all of those who have contributed to making this event possible.