

“Religious Studies” in Japan and Future Prospects

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“New Trends” in Religious Studies?

IF WE ARE TO speak of “new trends” in religious studies, first we must recall that religious studies underwent a radical change from its beginnings at the end of the 19th century and through the 20th century, both in the subject of its study and in its methodology. If it is true that religious studies is facing another period of radical change as the 20th century comes to a close, then an analysis of the new trends will have to take into account the kind of opportunity that was afforded by the previous changes. Only by consciously recognizing the development of academic interests will we be able to perceive the future prospects of religious studies.

A TURNING POINT AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

One of the tendencies in the study of religion in Europe at the end of the 19th century was to question anew the potential for cultural development in the face of new knowledge concerning various cultures in Asia, Africa, and other areas of the world outside of Europe. This was a necessary step for a European culture steeped in Christianity. This tendency is clearly symbolized in F. Max Müller’s proclamation of a “science of religion.”¹ Müller’s scholarship has a special character to it and, perhaps because he was thinking of the term *Religionswissenschaft* in his native language, the concept of the “science of religion” remained ambiguous and was never widely accepted. Still, Müller’s proclamation became the starting point for new transformations in religious studies. As a result, the study of religion in the 20th century opened new horizons, and developed in manifold ways. Christian theology, which had been synonymous with the study of religion in Europe up until that

¹ See F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London, 1873).

time, was forced to adapt to the new situation by incorporating these new tendencies as a subsidiary dimension of its own discipline. Müller was primarily concerned with the sacred texts of Asia, and perhaps for this reason the “direction” of research—not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world (including the United States)—has followed his lead. In the process, data on religious phenomena that had remained unorganized in areas outside of Europe became vital for analysis from this new “foreign” (i.e., European) perspective. As we will see below, religious studies in Japan arose as part of this general trend.

What, exactly, were the new transformations that were symbolized by Müller’s proclamation of a “science of religion”? With an eye on our current situation, it is helpful to limit the discussion to two points: the subject matter and methods of religious studies. As for subject matter, even in Europe we see serious attempts to relate similar non-Christian religious phenomena to Christianity, but not to the point of forfeiting a strong sense of the superiority of Christianity. Even in Müller’s case the latent assumption that Christianity offered a model for understanding all of religion held on in religious studies for a long time. Since Müller himself approached religion mainly from the perspective of their sacred texts, he tended to focus on those aspects of religion that fit his interests. The fact that he changed the name of the final stage in his classification of religions from “psychological religions” to “theosophy”² shows that his outlook extended beyond the usual “positive (or ‘historical’) religions.” When Müller says that religion lives within “the human heart,” he is reflecting the (Enlightenment) idea of “natural religion.” The new transformation in the subject of research, therefore, included not only an expanded focus from just Christianity to that of all religions, but also showed signs of going beyond just the historical forms of religion to include the subject of an ideal “natural religion.” This could be taken as a vestige of the Enlightenment. However, the problems and limitations of the Enlightenment, which had started in the seventeenth century, had already been pointed out by this time, so the currents in religious studies after Müller would take a different path in the 20th century.

Let us now consider the new transformations in the method of the study of religion. As unknown and undifferentiated elements surfaced in research, it was only a matter of time before the question of proper academic distance from the subject matter would become an issue. Müller adopted the “comparative” method. As he advanced from comparing languages to comparing religions, his focus on the historical religions represented a critical and creative force in a field previously dominated by “theoretic theology.” Yet his “comparisons” led to schematizations of levels of development based on value judgements of superior and inferior whose

² F. Max Müller, *Theosophy or Psychological Religion: Gifford Lectures 1892* (London, 1893). The other categories are “physical religion” and “anthropological religion.”

Enlightenment leanings assured Christianity's position at the highest stage. The problem is endemic to all "comparative religion." Eventually the method of comparative religion was taken up within the context of Christian missiology and accepted as a supplementary field in Christian theology. If we look at the last turning point in religious studies in the latter half of the 19th century, the point at which the Enlightenment was transcended, the important task in the next period will be to integrate, without confusion or separation, the accumulated knowledge concerning the history of religions with the task of typologically and systematically organizing this knowledge.

THE CHAOS OF THE LATTER HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The atmosphere surrounding the new religious studies that appeared in the 20th century as a result of the developments mentioned above was optimistic, despite a tense relationship with the traditional apologetics (as represented by Christian theology) of particular organized religions. Questions that arose in Europe, were due in part to the information concerning religious phenomena gathered from areas outside of Europe, so it was not difficult for systematized knowledge of religious phenomena to spread back to these areas. For those scholars who thought that the concept of "religion" was self-evident, the hitherto unknown information gathered from these areas [outside of Europe] was perceived as material that could enrich the concept of religion. In the first half of the 20th century, various discrepancies that arose from trying to apply the notion of "religion" to similar phenomena was not taken too seriously, nor was there any hint of reflection on apparently religious phenomena emerging from the margins or outside of the distinctive religious organizations. The central concern of the time was to emphasize the significance of the positivistic method in contrast to traditional Christian theology, and this approach did lead to some results. From the perspective of a later time, it is ironic that in a broad sense positivism itself is a type of theological standpoint. At the early stages, however, the increase in knowledge concerning religious history gained all the attention and did not allow the luxury of facing basic methodological issues. Gradually the various perspectives of sociology, psychology, and anthropology were added to religious studies. In the sense that it made this possible, the broad application of an unquestioned concept of religion proved effective.

The notion of "religion" has taken many forms, and continues to change. This ambiguity has become an issue again during the latter half of the 20th century. During the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), we saw the most traditional and most institutionalized religious organization—the Roman Catholic Church—face and deal with this issue directly. Around the same time the issue of secularization came to the fore, prompting an open debate on what Thomas Luckmann called "invisible religion" and once again demonstrating the change that had occurred in

the idea of religion.³ The prediction of secularization theory that religion in contemporary society would become increasingly individualistic was at the same time a diagnosis of the crisis facing established religious institutions, albeit one that only further contributed to the malaise by failing to offer any prescription other than the assurance that the problems were too big for institutional religions to tackle on their own.

Especially since the rise (and fall) of secularization theory, the study of religion in contemporary society can no longer restrict itself to established religious organizations. There is far too much of religion that falls between the cracks or indeed has yet to be recognized as “religious.” The distinction between “visible” religious organizations and “invisible” religiosity is already present in the work of William James and John Dewey⁴ and was tacitly accepted by classic theories of religious studies, even though it is only in recent years that it has been taken up more explicitly. Thinking in these terms helps clarify the ties between religion and local culture and also opens the notion of religion to horizons beyond local culture. From there it is a short step to the question of religion and globalization, reconfirming an aim that was important during the beginning of religious studies in the 20th century: to put preconceived notions of religion to the test before the diverse cultures of the world.

Along with the expansion and fluidity of the concept of religion, the search for empirical methods has also been revived. Religious studies became an empirical “science” only when it succeeded in comprehensively explaining “religion” on the basis of historical facts and data. Attempts were made to incorporate the methods of sociology, psychology, and anthropology to develop an independent and autonomous field of religious studies. But the methods of these disciplines, rather than accept the study of religion as an independent field and collaborate in trying to understand its distinctive phenomena, tended to reduce religion to secondary factors within their own fields. At this point, in an attempt to focus on “religion” per se, there is a shift of expectation among scholars of religion to “the phenomenology of religion.”⁵ This originally involved an attempt to organize and classify phenomena that are common to all religions, and to seek out its meaning, and, while avoiding normative judgements, to seek out the basis for typologies and

³ This is not the place to go into details concerning the secularization debate. Suffice it to say that the debate was at its peak in the 1960s.

⁴ See, for example, W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York & London, 1902), and J. Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, 1934).

⁵ The advocacy of phenomenology of religion begins in the early half of the 20th century with works of G. van der Leeuw such as, *Einführung in der Phänomenologie der Religion* (Darmstadt, 1925), and *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Tübingen, 1933). If we include the work of G. Mensching, F. Heiler, M. Eliade, and G. Widengren within this category, we can say that the field underwent a conscious and decisive development from the 1960s.

systematization. We can recognize the significance of this movement in the sense that it attempted to remove the evolutionary scheme that had dominated the former historical study of religions and tried to thoroughly reconsider the interpretive framework of the history of religions. However, the relationship with the phenomenological movement in philosophy was never clear, and the field in general never came into focus. Even if we connect this situation with a “new humanism” based on “creative hermeneutics,⁶ or advocate a “new style” of the phenomenology of religion,⁷ there is no basic change. However, as a result of this development, it has become clear that the phenomenology of religion can only continue to try in some way to incorporate into its method the subject who attempts to interpret the history of religions. If this is true, the attempt to establish religious studies as an empirical science poses the question as to how we should understand an “empirical science,” which leaves us in a situation not so different from that of religious studies around the turning of the last century. The various developments in methods in religious studies during the 20th century, however, may be due to the fact that religious studies, after separating from the unity provided by the personal integration by Max Müller, became too independent to see the mutual connections. In any case, this “pluralism of methods” seems to be a common tendency among contemporary academic disciplines, and is one of the characteristic trends of our day.

In the latter half of the 20th century, it seems that the doubts concerning the unification of all things that could not be originally unified is being emphasized all the more. In the 1960s W. C. Smith proposed that the practice of referring to organizations with mutually independent doctrines as “religions” is a modern Western product that was then exported around the world.⁸ Since then many people have made this point an issue and have tried to point out the ideological nature of the discourse that attempts to unify various phenomena under the rubric of “religion,” even if they do not necessarily take the same standpoint as Smith. However, even if we admit that there are problems with discourses uncritically using the concept of “religion,” there is no doubt that there is an academic significance to the gathering of knowledge concerning various historical facts that have been sought under the rubric of “religion.” When methods in religious studies are fluid, there is nothing left except knowledge of the facts, and this becomes fodder for giving birth to new insights. To begin with, it can be said that the clarification of the variety of historical religious phenomena brought about a shake-up in research methods.

⁶ See M. Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 1ff., 60ff.

⁷ See J. Waardenburg, *Reflections on the Study of Religion* (The Hague, 1978), p. 93.

⁸ W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York, 1962, 1978), pp. 15ff. (cf. Forward by John Hick).

Like attempts to unify all varieties of historical phenomena, approaches that seek to transcend history have not met with ready acceptance. Mircea Eliade's proposal that the world be reconceived through "archetypes and repetition,"⁹ a rejection of former concepts of history, was effective as a criticism aimed at Christian culture, but as a method for religious studies was simply another form of the phenomenology of religion, and actually was a surreptitious extension of the previous century's concern with the "origins" of religion. It is hardly surprising that this proposal was criticized as a religious theory in search of "dreamtime."¹⁰

In sum, the "new trends" in religious studies at the end of the 20th century, while based on an abundance of information on the history of religion gathered through modern methods, look to be a trial-and-error attempt to dissolve conflicts stemming from the mixture of empirical technique with various kinds of underlying interests. Though more complicated today, they are a continuation of "new trends" inherited from the last century. In his day Müller referred to the "science of religion" as the "last of the sciences,"¹¹ and indeed at the present time "religious studies" is still concerned with clarifying the axis of its own coordinates at the borders of other disciplines.

"Religious Studies" in Japan

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AS AN IMPORTED ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

The Japanese word for "religious studies," *shūkyōgaku*, has a broad and a narrow meaning, which even today overlap. In Japan religious thinking, with its Shinto and Buddhist undercurrents, did not take a distinctive form the way that Christian theology did. Rather, it has existed on the fringes of organized religion as a kind of vague and apologetic intellectual exercise. The "new trends" in the study of religion that had begun in Europe were introduced into Japan in the latter part of the last century as culture "in translation." The name "religious studies" was affixed and the "intellectual exercises" that had existed previously in Japan were taken to belong to this category. This is the "broad" meaning of religious studies in Japan. Later the discipline of "comparative religion" was introduced along with Christian theology as a branch of missiology. This caused some confusion, but the introduction of the discipline was the chief factor in promoting academic interest in religion in Japan. This is the narrow meaning of "religious studies" in Japan. Kishimoto Hideo once wrote that Japan is a "laboratory of religions" and that "'religious studies' is an academic discipline that should have originated in

⁹ See M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York, 1954, 1974).

¹⁰ See T. Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (Chicago 1993).

¹¹ F. Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (London, 1867), vol. 1, p. xix.

Japan,”¹² though in fact it did not. Lacking a strong opponent like Christian theology in the West to stimulate the birth of religious studies, the discipline was imported to Japan, but not without distinctive traits of assimilation.

First of all, in terms of general world trends, the acceptance of religious studies in Japan was accomplished relatively quickly. In 1896 Kishimoto Nobuta, Anesaki Masaharu, and others set up the Association for Comparative Religion, and in 1905 a course in religious studies was inaugurated at Tokyo Imperial University with Anesaki as the first professor. The World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 and a symposium for specialists in religion in 1896 set the stage for further developments. By that time Kasahara Kenju and Nanjō Bun’yū were studying in Europe with Müller, and as early as 1884 Ishikawa Shundai was using “religious studies” in the contemporary sense of the term. In a word, religious studies soon found itself at home in Japan as an academic discipline. Around 1870 the term *shūkyō* was officially adopted as the translation equivalent of “religion” and soon came into general use. But as with many imported ideas that become current as technical terms, “religion” was also introduced precipitously and without a full appreciation of its background or meaning. The effects of this can still be felt today in the general attitude of people toward religion. This may not be peculiar to Japan, but simply put, the Japanese tended to restrict the idea of religion to a distinctive set of phenomena within definite limits, such as associating the term with particular teachings or doctrines. Only later would the religious aspect of everyday life be recognized as significant.

The fact that the concept of religion dropped unripe into the Japanese language may in turn have helped it gain the quick currency it did. After all, this was a period during which Japanese society, having just emerged from a long period of isolation, was faced with the need to quickly come to grips with a variety of foreign cultures. The new, comprehensive concept of religion was one that was expected to be useful as a bridge between Japanese society and the rest of the world. The same can be said about the concept of “religious studies.” Through this discipline people could, from a bit of an objective distance, gaze on the emerging values of the coming age. The statesmen of the time could not feel at ease and accept Christian theology, but “religious studies” was another matter. It was a discipline that was regarded as normatively neutral, and could thus fit into the needs of the national universities as public institutions. Thus the existing positions of power that had formed in Europe between Christian theology and religious studies was reversed by assimilation into Japanese society. This is how religious studies in Japan took on different nuances from those of Müller’s “science of religion,” or later “comparative religion,” in its relation with Christian theology.

¹² Kishimoto Hideo, *Shūkyōgaku* (Taimeidō, 1961), p. 1.

Another characteristic that can be seen in the acceptance of “religious studies” in its narrow sense in Japan is that this academic discipline was introduced through the mediation of Unitarianism.¹³ Kishimoto Nobuta—who with Anesaki founded the Association for Comparative Religion—is symbolic of this influence; he studied at Harvard, which was at the time a stronghold of Unitarianism.¹⁴ How did this influence the character of religious studies in Japan? Unitarianism teaches that Jesus was not God, and that people have within them the potential for moral progress. This teaching was much easier for the Japanese to accept than that of orthodox Christianity. Unitarianism emphasizes reason and morality, and may even go beyond the boundaries of religion. In the eyes of the Japanese leaders who sought points of contact between Japan and the West while maintaining their own cultural traditions, Unitarianism was relatively harmless and easily acceptable.¹⁵ Supported in this way, religious studies quickly became a part of the mainstream of Japanese academia. Religious studies in Japan, however, has yet to become free of the suspicion that it surreptitiously promotes the perspective of Unitarianism. On the other hand, Unitarianism was closely associated with socialist movements, and as it expanded its influence in Japanese society, the so-called orthodox Christian churches have, in contrast to those in the West, become more and more exclusive.

THE ACCEPTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN JAPAN

Anesaki Masaharu, as the first professor at the post of “Religious Studies” at Tokyo Imperial University, and thus the first conscious “scholar of religion” in Japan, began his work by considering religions from a comparative perspective. His incentive for doing “comparative” studies seems to have been based on an interest in the “development” or “progress” of religion.¹⁶ His lectures at the Tokyo Senmon Gakkō were compiled as *Comparative Religion* (1897), and these were further expanded into *An Introduction to Religious Studies* in 1900 when he was still 28 years old.¹⁷ The title of the work attests to Anesaki’s attempt to grapple with and systematize the academic discipline of religious studies apart from “comparative

¹³ More specifically, perhaps it would be better to say that it was introduced through the mediation of the “Free Christian” movement that included the Universal Gospel Church (Fukyū Fukuin Kyōkai) and the Universalists.

¹⁴ For details on this point see Suzuki Norihisa, *Meiji Shūkyō shichō no kenkyū—Shūkyōgaku kotohajime* [Studies on Meiji religious thought—The beginnings of religious studies] (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1979).

¹⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi, the prominent educator and writer and founder of Keio University, played a major role in the introduction of Unitarianism to Japan.

¹⁶ See Anesaki’s autobiography, *Waga shōgai* [My life] (Yōtoku-sha, 1951); reprinted in 1974 in centenary commemoration of his birth as *Shinpan: Waga shōgai* [My life (New edition)] (see p. 6).

¹⁷ See *Shūkyōgaku gairon* [An introduction to religious studies] (Tokyo, 1900).

religion.” The structure of the book, let it be said, was derived from C. R. Edward von Hartmann. In addition to sections on the psychology of religion, religious ethics, and the sociology of religion, Anesaki adds his own contribution in a section on “religious pathology.” A few days before he left for study in Germany he wrote the foreword to this work, explaining that “I have made public the results of my initial inquiries in the hope that some day I can complete it.” This hope was never to be realized.¹⁸ Yanagawa Kei’ichi has pointed out that this inclination to put off the creation of a systematic religious studies has become, ever since Anesaki, “one of the tendencies of religious studies [in Japan].” In this sense Anesaki’s *Introduction to Religious Studies* is “one of the monuments” of Japanese religious studies, and I must agree. However, to put off the creation of a systematic religious studies is, in effect, to put off developing a methodology. A number of books entitled *Introduction to Religious Studies* or just *Religious Studies* have been published in the meantime, and each of these books eloquently reveals the individual character of the author; they are part of the trial-and-error process that has the creation of a systematic religious studies as its goal.¹⁹

In order to avoid the difficulties of creating a systematic religious studies based on a typology of historical-religious phenomena, one can change one’s viewpoint away from abstract concepts of religion to that of more subjective religious experience, and then build up one’s thoughts and impressions from this perspective. The study of religion in Japan, from the first half of the 20th century, has (along with “religious studies” in the narrow sense) incorporated the inquiry into this possibility, starting from subjective experiences. This inquiry, having a close solidarity with philosophy, has developed into a discipline of religious philosophy as an independent field. The person most responsible for establishing this within the university system was Hatano Seiichi, professor at the post of “Religious Studies” at Kyoto Imperial University. Hatano oriented his own position by focussing on Christianity as one historical religion, and on that basis developed his studies of intellectual history. He established and devoted his energies to a second post of “Religious Studies” in Kyoto, this one called Christian Studies (which was different from Unitarianism, and refers generally to “orthodox” Christianity). Hatano’s interests did not stop there. He went on to study intellectual history and from there the philosophy of religion, where his chief interest was with “the reflective self-understanding of religious experience and its theoretical retrospection.” In other words, the subject of his religious philosophy was “religious experience in general,”

¹⁸ After returning to Japan, Anesaki came to see his *Introduction to Religious Studies* as a mere “framework” or “skeleton,” writing in his autobiography that “I gradually came to abandon the attempt to create a skeletal framework for religion, and instead sought the flesh and blood of its essence” (*My Life [New edition]*, pp. 108–9).

¹⁹ See, for example, the works by Katō Genchi (1912), Sano Katsuya (1923), Uno Enkū (1931), Ishibashi Chishin (1949), and Kishimoto Hideo (1961).

and it was here that he aimed to achieve “a contemplative grasp of the essence.”²⁰

In comparison with his contributions to Christian studies, Hatano’s methodology has not been very influential in the world of religious studies in Japan. His stress on experience, however, laid the ground for a tradition that continues even today. Nishitani Keiji, for example, although his point of departure differs from that of Hatano, can be said to share Hatano’s approach to religion by way of experience. For Nishitani, “religion is at all times the individual affair of each individual” so it cannot be understood from the outside. “The religious quest alone is the key to understanding it; there is no other way.” At the same time, Nishitani points out that the philosophy of religion, “since the classical systems of the nineteenth century, however, have based themselves on something ‘immanent’ in man such as reason or intuition or feeling,” and that it has now become impossible to keep to this standpoint. Therefore Nishitani’s considerations of the philosophy of religion “take their stand at the point where traditional philosophies of religion have broken down or been broken through.”²¹

The conspicuous difference in the approach of those who accepted and followed the type of religious studies introduced by M. Müller and the approach of those who attempted to understand religion on the basis of “experience,” is reflected in their statements concerning how to view “culture.” Kishimoto Hideo described religion as “cultural phenomena,” and claimed that religious experience as “human activity” could be subject to scientific research. Hatano, on the other hand, claimed that “when considered from the outside and apart from experience, objective expressions of religion, as representations, institutions, activities, and so forth, are nothing more than cultural products both in content and in structure. Unless illumined by the light of experience, the internal and religious meaning of such expressions cannot be grasped.”²² Nishitani adds that religion is not something, “like culture, which, while related to the individual, does not need to concern each individual.”²³

Comparing these statements from two different standpoints, we see that both are deeply concerned with the relationship between religion and culture. Hatano recognizes that the “objective” expressions of religion are cultural products, as Kishimoto insisted. However, Hatano seeks to go beyond them and question their internal meaning. This is a search for “religious experience in general,” so it is not a matter of remaining at the level of subjective individuality. Thus the question is,

²⁰ See Hatano Seiichi, *Shūkyō tetsugaku joron* [Introduction to a philosophy of religion] (Iwanami, 1940).

²¹ Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness* (University of California Press, 1982), 2, xlix (*Shūkyō to wa nanika*, Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1961, 3–4).

²² Hatano Seiichi, *Zenshū* (Collected Works), vol. 3, 322.

²³ Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, 2 (*Shūkyō to wa nanika*, Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1961, 4).

at what level should we consider “religion”? According to Nishitani, religion is not at the same level as culture. However, can it be said that there is an objective “culture” that exists apart from human subjects? As we can see in the discourse of post-modernism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, and so forth, theories of culture are becoming an important theme in contemporary thought. We could say that the interest is shifting from the attempt to empirically grasp objective facts, to an emphasis on the subjective activities and individuality of human beings. If this is indeed the case, these two major perspectives in Japanese religious studies are not really so far apart from each other after all.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

A group of religious studies specialists in the line of Kishimoto Hideo published a small booklet through the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Education in 1961 on *Issues Concerning the Definition of “Religion.”* In 1977 a symposium on “Rethinking the Concept of Religion” was sponsored at the 36th annual conference of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies. Since then, religious studies in Japan has shown an acute sensitivity to the fluidity of the concept of religion and has repeatedly attempted to rethink religious phenomena from a wide variety of perspectives. As the Enlightenment’s “natural religion” faded away, so has the tendency to emphasize “objectivity” and to view religious studies merely as a “scientific study of religion.” As we greet the end of the 20th century, religious studies in Japan faces the task of deepening its basic ideas on religion and culture. Culture is a global concern today, and as views on the subject expand and become flexible, the 20th-century habit of thinking about religion within the constraints of culture is gradually becoming an issue also in Japan. Secularization, fundamentalism, globalization, etc.—all problems and issues faced by the contemporary study of religion as a whole—cannot be discussed without a basic reexamination of the theory of culture.

When we speak of religion within the horizons of culture, Japanese religious studies has effectively developed its own field of research, namely the study of folk religion and new religious movements. The phenomena are basically universal, but their manifestations in Japan are distinctive. A fluid idea of religion made this an easy subject matter to take up, although folk religion is closely related to daily customs and blends transparently into the general culture. Similarly, new religious movements occasionally burst onto the scene dramatically, but just as often they express themselves in movements that permeate local culture gradually and without the usual institutional signposts to identify them. These movements—some more than others—reflect changes going on in society. Researchers who have focused on folk religion and new religious movements have been in the vanguard of attempts to rethink the concept of religion and have been blessed with the

opportunity to examine the relationship between religion and culture in both its static and dynamic dimensions. The issue to be faced now is to rethink these themes once more while consciously taking them as one's own task as a subjective inquirer. Through this process a different perspective may arise—one that is different from those that arise from external interests in an objective guise.

The attempt to systematize religious studies into a form that is universally acceptable has not been successful, and this holds true for Japan as well. Again, the idea of “religious experience in general” has not been verified to everyone's satisfaction. There is a recent trend in Japan for groups of authors to publish collections of essays from a variety of fields of religious studies in the hopes of providing a comprehensive treatment of the subject. Whether one calls it “empirical science” or “religious philosophy,” it is clear that a unified methodology is difficult to achieve, and admission of these limits is the more honest response.

The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) has an ongoing debate concerning “the history of religions.” It seems to me that here, too, we have no choice but to open the field to a variety of methods and approaches reflecting differences in personal motives. Claims that we should focus attention on fieldwork (as in anthropology) in order to avoid the sort of theology that has often accrued to historical interpretations is understandable, but not even today's fieldwork methods are free of cultural constraints and therefore subjective motivation. The “new trends” in religious studies from the 19th to the 20th century did not actively utilize the concepts of “theology,” which was by and large relegated to the status of an apologetics for specific established institutions, whether Christian or otherwise. In the case of Japan, however, the concept of theology may need to be broadened and deliberately applied, since religious phenomena are not limited to established institutions but also include all sorts of movements and activities marginal to organized religion. Such borderline phenomena are, if viewed in their own context, connected with the subjective commitment of individual people, and cannot be subjected to simple normative judgements as to their inferiority or superiority. Therefore it is not altogether unwarranted to take into account “theological” motives with regard to these borderline phenomena.

Unable to begin from the Enlightenment idea of “natural religion,” religious studies today gathers as much data as it can concerning concrete historical religions and tries to systematize it by identifying underlying commonalities—a goal that is in fact never achieved. At the same time, talk of the essence of religion has lost its luster, and we must approach historical religions through individual experiences. Therefore if we seek “experience in general,” this search will end up taking the same path as the search for systematization. In short, all the religious activities of human beings, whether conscious or unconscious, are concerned with subjective choices and responsibility, so the study of religion must be based on this basic

recognition of subjectivity, and it must rebuild itself as an intellectual system of manifold methods. As a result, as pluralism continues to advance, religious studies also continues to have its identity questioned; this seems to be the common fate of all academic fields in the humanities today.

Religious studies in Japan, by incorporating religious studies in the narrow sense and clarifying the methodological ambiguity of the earlier apologetic exercises, was thus able to widen its subject of study. It is certain that the word “religion” entails a special perspective, but in any case we cannot ignore the significance of the fact that it was able to relativize European Christianity, and it appears to have played the same role with regard to indigenous religious organizations in Japan. That is to say, the concept of religion does not necessarily have positive connotations in the Christian world, and it has often encountered silent resistance. It is not unusual for an apologetic theology to link its specific religious standpoint with something that transcends “religion.” For example, in his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth tries to interpret the “revelation of God” as the “sublation of religion” (*Aufhebung der Religion*).²⁴ In this case “religion” refers to a “lack of faith.” However, assuming a “higher concept” (such as “revelation” or “absolute nothingness”) that transcends the concept of “religion” can also be said to be a type of theological standpoint. Religious studies can satisfactorily fulfill its task by admitting the presence of this standpoint and considering religion at the horizons of culture, not at some higher horizon.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the significance and limits of social pronouncements from the perspective of religious studies in the narrow sense. The contemporary religious situation is constantly shifting and moving and becoming new, and every now and then “scholars of religious studies” are called upon to provide social commentary. This is something that should be welcomed, if it is sought in the sense of a fundamental questioning of contemporary society. However, often pronouncements are sought only in terms of short comments concerning special events connected with certain religious organizations, and these comments are sought by representatives of the mass media who do not have even a basic knowledge of religion. In such cases a conscientious scholar of religions must be very cautious and discreet. Unfortunately, this sort of situation is more common than not. In such cases the primary duty of scholars of religion should be to offer material based on the information they have gathered, and they should avoid making easy judgements concerning the authenticity or truth or falsity of the matter at hand. However, it is also necessary to be aware that a scholar of religion cannot escape some subjective involvement in the matter. No matter what

²⁴ K. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, V/2 (Zürich, 1938), 304–97. “Revealed religion is restricted by the revelation of God, but the revelation of God is not restricted by revealed religion” (360).

pronouncement is made, the scholar must take responsibility for it, and not pass it off simply as the irrefutable results of scientific research. The social pronouncements of scholars of religion must be made with the awareness that their own standpoint can often be taken in a fragmentarily relativizing way, and that they must be responsible for their own stance.

[translated by Paul L. Swanson]