

Response to Professors Takezawa and Tsuchiya

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IT IS A PRIVILEGE to be able to respond to the fine papers presented by Professors Takezawa and Tsuchiya. Both of them deal with pressing questions in Religious Studies and raise crucial issues for our consideration. As in the United States, Religious Studies in Japan, according to Professor Tsuchiya's account, is not a single discipline (whether historical, philosophical, social scientific, etc.) with its own methodology, but a discursive field in which many approaches to study of religion are housed and discussed. Perhaps I am somewhat typical of an American Religious Studies scholar. By training I am a historian of late antiquity. My most recent book is on Plotinus, a Greek philosopher who taught in Rome in the middle of the third century of the common era. I also have books on religion and the visual arts, religion and film, religion and gender, hermeneutics, and Augustine.

In our time in which the internationalization of Religious Studies is rapidly growing, none of the questions and issues with which we must deal is more pressing than how we take into account not only the theoretical issues and arguments, but also the influence of the historical and cultural contexts out of which we speak.

For example, Professor Tsuchiya's most interesting discussion of the future of Religious Studies in Japan leads him to urge that religions be approached through the experiences of the individual adherents. He highlights the centrality of individual "subjective choices and responsibility" to religious studies (p. 32). Are there features of contemporary Japanese culture that prompt his emphasis on the subjectivity of the individual? In the United States, Religious Studies scholars are, if I may make a dangerous generalization, presently emphasizing the centrality of communal religious experience. They are concerned, not with the imaginary autonomous Enlightenment individual—we have thought quite enough about him—but with religious institutions, faith communities, sacred texts, rituals, and the relationship of religious communities to the society and culture in which they exist and to which they respond religiously.

If I have accurately identified a difference of approach to Religious Studies in Japan and America, it is not, I believe, one that should be discussed on the level of a theoretical difference. Rather, we should explore the possibility that our inevitable subjective commitments are based on experience in our different societies. After all, discerning judgments about what we find important to call attention to, to articulate, and to prescribe for are what make our work relevant to the people we talk to and with. Yet they do create an increment of difficulty in conversations with colleagues of different cultural experiences.

This panel, indeed the Japan Academy of Religion's gracious invitation to representatives of the American Academy of Religion to visit your annual meeting, is based on the conviction that our two academies will both learn by our conversation. In fact, it is hoped that this conversation will be the first of an ongoing series of discussions in which the potential insulation and myopia of both academies are overcome. If this is to be achieved, it will, I suggest again, be highly important to be able to acknowledge and explore the role of our different cultural experiences in shaping our ideas about Religious Studies. If we are to find conversations across religions, cultures, social arrangements, and training in scholarly methods fruitful, delightful rather than threatening, we must be attentive to the non-scholarly factors that construct our different perspectives.

Respect for differences of perspective based on complex social and individual experiences should not, however, make it impossible for us to disagree on occasion. Disagreements stimulate thought, and if what we want to do is to think together, we will need to be honest about disagreement, even while acknowledging the possibility that we have not understood one another, or that there are cultural factors that influence our different thinking.

In contrast to some cultural differences, Religious Studies in Japan and the United States share some striking similarities. One of these is the profusion of religions in our societies. Professor Tsuchiya points out that Japan is a natural habitat for Religious Studies with its "laboratory of religions" (p. 20). A recent article by Harvey Cox has also noted that modernization and religion flourish together in Japan, "possibly the most modern society in the world." His example of Japanese modernization? "Few other countries can boast taxi doors that open by themselves" (Cox 1999, p. 6).

Similarly, Americans are becoming increasingly religious, but the United States is no longer what Will Herberg called a "three-religion country," by which he meant Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. In the rapidly changing American religious landscape, mosques and temples dot the horizon not only in Manhattan and Berkeley, but also in Phoenix, Detroit, Toledo, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Professor Diana Eck at Harvard University has recently published a book and a CD entitled "The Pluralism Project." The project offers a directory that includes

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples, Islamic Centers, Sikh gurdwaras, Baha'i temples, pagan groups, and Zoroastrian Centers. Moreover, religious loyalties in America are increasingly shaped by ethnic identities: I quote from "The Pluralism Project:"

There are Hispanic Baptists, Chinese Catholics, and Thai, Vietnamese, and Cambodian Buddhists. Los Angeles has over 200 Buddhist temples with congregations from all over the world. New immigration has brought Jewish immigrants from Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe.

These religious groups do not exist across vast geographical distances from one another as they did in the recent past: a Muslim Community Center, a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a Disciples of Christ church and a Hindu temple are virtually next-door neighbors on Hampshire Avenue in Silver Spring, Maryland. A Vietnamese Buddhist temple and a Baptist Church are neighbors on the same road on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. A Lutheran church and a Buddhist temple are across the street from one another in Garden Grove, California.

The urgency of living as neighbors with people of so many variations of religious persuasion creates a new, demanding, and stimulating situation in which to be scholars of Religious Studies. What does it mean to study religion in a religiously plural society? How do the academies in which religious studies are conducted need to change to address this new and unprecedented situation in American religious life? For the *study* of religion—as contrasted with *teaching* our religions—acquires increasing importance in a society (and a world) in which people of diverse religious loyalties must live next door to one another.

We must acknowledge initially that most of the world's religions have a shameful past in the sense that whenever a religion has had the power to compel adherence, it has almost always done so. Religious difference is apparently one of the most difficult kinds of difference for human beings to accept. The most blatant form of religious chauvinism is religious wars. But a more subtle form of religious chauvinism has been prevalent in scholarship about religion. In the mid-twentieth century the theologian Paul Tillich pointed out that scholars tend to describe their own religion on its most profound level, while considering other religions on their most superficial levels, as "futile human attempts to reach God." It is possible to believe strongly in the divine revelation of one's own religion while recognizing that its beliefs and practices emerged in history as human efforts to give form and substance to that revelation. As human products, then, religious beliefs, practices, and institutions are always in need of critical scrutiny. We must constantly ask: Do our religious institutions, language, and rituals effectively body forth the generous and life-giving heart of the universe?

Religious studies has several publics: academic colleagues, faith communities and the public sphere. It is pressingly urgent in our time to ask: Can religion serve

the common good rather than dividing people and setting them in opposition to one another? If religion is to serve the common good, it will need to be studied, ardently and critically, for its pitfalls as well as its promising proposals. There will, I suggest, even be strategic moments in which scholars of religion and religious people must be prepared to translate values, ethics, and faithful practices into secular language in order to communicate to a diverse public. It is always the temptation of scholars of religion to gleefully point out the religious roots of secular ideas and values. There are occasions on which we will need to resist such territorializing. We have not yet taken seriously enough resistance to specifically religious ideas based on broadly shared traumatizing experiences with religious people and institutions. Each time I speak as a representative of religious studies in a secular venue I am reminded (usually in the question period after a lecture) that our faith traditions have done some terrible things to people, that we need to stop explaining these away as anomalies, but rather to recognize, confess and repent these abuses.

In short, our similarities of context may be, in fact, much more significant than our differences. Secularization, if we mean by that the absence of religion, does not characterize the context in which scholars of religion work at the end of the twentieth century. Harvey Cox's 1999 article in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* examines the "dramatic failure of the secularization thesis as an explanatory paradigm for religion, culture, and politics in the twentieth century." We live in a "religiously pluralistic (not secularized) culture," Cox concludes (1999, 6).



I turn now to the two papers presented for our discussion.

Professor Takezawa's paper examines Durkheim's approach to religion as the "idealized self-consciousness of a society." Although he does not discuss this in the paper, positivistic approaches to social science have been questioned from the mid-nineteenth century by Dilthey, and continuously thereafter by Weber, Adorno, Habermas, and Gadamer. Professor Takezawa argues that religion should instead be viewed as "imaginative or symbolic resolution of social contradictions" (p. 52). In postmodern religiously plural societies like Japan and the United States, the resolution of social contradictions seems to me too narrow a definition of the role of religion in society. In his 1967 book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, American sociologist Peter Berger suggests three social roles for a religion, namely the symbolic construction of a world, maintenance of that world, and theodicy, or addressing the inevitable dissonance between the symbolic world of a religion and the believer's new experience (Professor Takezawa's point).

I suspect that scholars the world over are inclined, when we are faced with difference, to articulate difference as contradiction and to seek to show how it can be overcome. Irreducible alterity is threatening both intellectually and psychologically. But difference is what we must live with in the twenty-first century, if we do not already. We live in societies in which totalizing social, political, and religious worldviews either compete or exist side-by-side in public life. The challenge to scholars of religion in this situation is to recognize the integrity and attractiveness, the specific warmth, of diverse religious worldviews even while refusing to reduce their difference to homogeneity. Berger's broader definition of religion's social role recognizes different worldviews as existing at the very heart of religions.

Professor Tsuchiya's paper begins with a very brief overview of the nineteenth-century development of Religious Studies. The two papers complement each other in that Professor Takezawa's paper includes some important figures (like Weber) not mentioned in Professor Tsuchiya's account. His attention is on the "open space," or area of negotiation that lies between religious groups and social phenomena, ultimately, on testing definitions of and attitudes toward, religion "in relation to the diverse cultures of the world" (p. 14). In order to articulate or flesh out the salient features of these spaces for negotiation, secularization theory is still very important. Problematic history of the term notwithstanding, secularization, "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols," refers to "empirically available processes of great importance in modern Western history" (Berger 1969, 106-7). Indeed, secularization, the collapse of broadly acknowledged and accepted religious warrants makes possible the "open space" Professor Tsuchiya cites as the location in which investigation of the link between religion and culture can proceed. Secularization founded the social transformation created by religious pluralism.

I found the section of his paper on Religion Studies in Japan very interesting and informative. The ways in which the development of Religious Studies in Japan converged and diverged from its development in the United States are fascinating. Its introduction through Unitarianism and the effects of this sponsorship are most interesting. The twin challenges of the methodology and philosophy of Religious Studies both focus on the role of religious experience and the relationship of religion and culture. Professor Tsuchiya suggests that Religious Studies in Japan must "deepen its basic ideas concerning the issue of religion and culture" (p. 28). His advocacy of adopting an approach not based on a subject-object model but one in which one subjectivity confronts and explores another is very important and useful.

The place of theology in this discursive field seems to be a concern in both our academies. The committed worldviews, beliefs, and practices of believers cannot be

elided by focus on religious phenomenologies. In the United States, in order to make study of religions other than one's own nonthreatening, we have tended to ignore the truth claims of other religions. We make other religions simply objects of study. If, however, we study other religions as we study our own, that is, in order to understand concretely and in detail each religion's intellectual and emotional power, we will need to take the risk of allowing ourselves to feel the power and beauty of another's religion.

Clearly the social contexts, the questions, and the issues at the forefront of discussion in the Japan Academy of Religion and the American Academy of Religion are similar in several important ways. Our differences also are intriguing. I look forward to continuing conversation with scholars of the Japan Academy of Religion on these important matters.

Bibliography

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