

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

International Cooperation among Research Centers around the World

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A three-year project to “promote the internationalization of religious studies,” carried out by the Nanzan Institute and funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science, came to an end in March 2006. A special workshop on “The Internationalization of Religious Studies” was sponsored at Nanzan in January to mark the end of the project, and to bring together representatives of the people and places that we came to know during the course of this project. Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya and Hirashima Misa, both research associates of the Institute, also attended and participated in the workshop, and agreed to write a report of their impressions. (For the report by Hirashima Misa, see the Institute’s Japanese-language Shohō.)

On 28 January 2006, a workshop on “the Internationalization of Religious Studies” was held at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nanzan University. This workshop was an outcome of a three-year project, funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science and carried out by the members of this institute to study the state of religious studies in the universities and research centers of various countries, with the purpose of promoting international co-operation in the study of religion. As a part of this research project, the members visited more than 50 research centers and universities in 19 different countries (as stated by Paul Swanson, Director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, in his Welcome and Introductory address). As the project reached its concluding phase, a workshop was planned that would invite scholars of religion from various countries to present an overview of the state of religious studies in their countries and also exchange views about the prospects and problems encountered in the internationalization of the study of religion. The five scholars invited for this workshop were: Walter Van Herck from the University of Antwerp (Belgium); Rein Raud from the Estonian

Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University (Estonia), who also teaches at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki (Finland); Frank Usarski from Pontificia Universidade Catolica, Sao Paulo (Brazil); Holly Grether from the University of California, Santa Barbara (USA) and Mary McGee of the Department of Religion, Columbia University, also from USA but representing the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in this workshop. Other participants of this workshop were the Research Fellows and other research associates of the Nanzan Institute, and scholars from other universities in Nagoya.

The main themes of the workshop were: (1) the current state of the study of religion in various areas, and the role of specific research centers; (2) the current state of graduate and post-doctoral research in various countries, and the problems of this area; and (3) the promotion of international cooperation in the study of religion, and the role that various centers can or should play in this regard.

Belgium

Walter Van Herck, who teaches at the University of Antwerp, spoke about the current state of religious studies in a pre-dominantly catholic Belgium. He began with an overview of the study of religion in Northern and Western Europe, comparing the researches in Catholic and Protestant countries. According to Van Herck, the study of religion in the West has fallen in the “trap of enlightenment,” that is, the culture of enlightenment produced the trend towards rational and objective study of religion that lessened the emphasis on emotional or charismatic aspects of religious experiences that characterizes Catholicism. Various religious institutes in Belgium have produced major research on religion, but these are not de-linked from their religious and missionary goals. However, the decline in enrollment in theology faculties and the subsequent strategy for survival by religious studies program has resulted in an increase in secular and objective study of religion. This has led to the internationalization of religious studies as new areas such as Asian religions, sociology of religion, or comparative religious studies were introduced. Moreover, the presence of Jews and now Muslim immigrants has prompted research on Judaism and Islam as well as on topics such as multi-religious society, religious tolerance, and so forth. However, Van Herck stated that this has the danger of religious studies becoming a kind of “cultural archeology.”

The University of Antwerp, with roots that date back to 1852, was founded in 2003 after the merger of three universities, one of them (UFSIA) being a Jesuit university. The Center for the Philosophy of Religion of the University of Antwerp conducts researches on rationality and religious trust as well as on religious passion and emotions. The University Centre Saint Ignatius (UCSIA)



of this university is a funding organization that supports research in religious studies and also provides grants to foreign visiting scholars who wish to conduct research in Belgium. Its objective is to continue the Jesuit tradition of involvement in university education, research, and community service in Antwerp and Flemish regions. There are also other institutes involved in the study of theology and mysticism. For instance, the Ruusbroec Society is involved in the study and publication of the mystical works of Jan van Ruusbroec, and research on the history of spirituality and mysticism in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands) in medieval and early modern times.

Estonia and Finland

Rein Raud spoke about the situation in religious studies in Estonia and Finland. Estonia was under the control of Soviet Union for fifty years. Religion was one of the areas that came under the complete sweep of the Soviet regime. Lutheranism is the dominant confession in Estonia, followed by Catholicism. Unlike Poland, there was no major dissident movement by the Church in Estonia. Rather the Church co-operated with the Soviet regime, making the educated and the intellectuals skeptical about Christianity.

In Estonia today, the study of religions is mostly carried out by Christian institutions, where very little attention is paid to the study of other non-

Christian religious traditions. Raud, who is a scholar of Japanese religious philosophy and has researched on Dōgen, claimed that the Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University (where he is affiliated) was an exception as it has a full-fledged undergraduate and postgraduate program in Asian Studies and Middle Eastern Studies. The Asian Studies and the Middle Eastern studies include many substantial courses on religion, including seminars to study religious texts of Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, or Middle-Eastern traditions. The curriculum combines courses in Asian languages and Asian religion and philosophical studies. The doctoral candidates as well as the faculty members of this institute are engaging in research on religion-related topics.

In order to enhance international cooperation in religions studies, Estonian Institute of Humanities proposes to institute an internationally organized Masters program in World Philosophy. This program will offer courses in Asian philosophical traditions and Asian languages. As Estonia is located in the center of the Scandinavian-Baltic-St. Petersburg area, they hope to get students from Scandinavia, the Baltics, other regions of Europe, as well as from Russia.

Raud also spoke about the religious studies program at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland. (In Finland, one is born either Lutheran, Catholic, or Orthodox and have to pay church tax. However, most Finnish, like Estonians, are skeptical about Christianity.) The Institute is part of the Faculty of Letters, which also includes many other departments dedicated to area studies, and is engaged in interdisciplinary research and teaching on all aspects of Asian and African history, culture, politics, religion, economics, and so forth. The Institute has MA and PhD students working on Chinese, Tibetan and Japanese religions. Earlier studies on East Asian religions at this Institute were doctrinal but now the focus is shifting towards anthropological and cultural investigation of religion, towards the study of “lived religion” rather than “bookish” teachings.

Brazil

Frank Usarski spoke about the organizational and financial problems that exist in the university system of Brazil and its influence on the study of religion in that country. According to Usarski, in Brazil the scientific or non-theological study of religion is “still young” and “only recently emerging” field of study. He attributed this to the delayed development of higher education in Brazil. Usarski gave a detailed explanation of the structure of education system in Brazil and the difference between public-funded and private-funded universities. The Faculty of Philosophy, Literature and Humanities (FFLCH) at the University of Sao Paulo (USP) has many prominent scholars of religion but it has failed to enhance the social scientific or sociological study of religion in Brazil because of the lack of

departmental exchanges or individual interactions between these scholars. The Federal University of Juiz de Fora (State of Minas Gerais) is a notable exception as it has been successfully running a graduate program in Science of Religion since 1993.

There are five private Catholic universities with graduate programs in religious studies; however they are mostly engaged in theological rather than sociological-scientific study of religion. Also, the research on religion in these universities are mostly focused on domestic religious phenomenon such as Afro-Brazilian religions and Pentecostalism.

In order to promote theoretical as well as empirical study of religion in Brazil, Usarski along with Rafael Shoji founded the Centre for the Study of Alternative Religions (CERAL) in 2001 within the Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo. It is involved in the documentation and analysis of religious movements, especially Eastern religions, that have made inroads into Brazil as a result of Asian immigration. Research on Buddhism is the main focus of the centre. The centre has produced publications on Buddhism in Portuguese, English and German, including the anthology "O Budismo no Brasil." The MA and PhD candidates of this centre are conducting research on Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism, Shinto, Japanese new religions, and other Asian religions. CERAL also runs the program unit "Eastern Religions" of the Brazilian Association for the History of Religion (ABHR).

In order to further internationalize religious studies in Brazil and also to enhance the international standing of CERAL, the center is involved in exchanges with the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM, Great Britain), Center for Studies on New Religions (CENSUR, Italy), and so forth. The centre has also set up a bilingual website (English and Portuguese) that provides information about the research conducted by its members. It is also encouraging its members to publish in English and other foreign languages as well as translating the works of foreign scholars. In 2007, the center intends to hold an international conference on Eastern Religions in Sao Paulo.

However, the lack of funds and organizational support remains a major impediment in this attempt to promote internationalization of religious studies in Brazil.

United States

Holly Grether spoke about the development of religious studies department in her university, the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) and the problems encounter in the internationalization of religious studies in USA. In 1940s, the study of religion started at UCSB as a course offered in the political science department. In 1962, following the US Supreme Court Schemp decision,

the Religious studies department was established in UCSB, with an emphasis on non-theological approach to the study of religion. At present, it offers courses in East Asian religions, South Asian religions, Buddhist studies, Catholic studies, and so forth. On the issue of funding, Grether states that the religious studies program receives funds from various religious communities. But she insisted that this did not compromise how religion is taught at UCSB because an iron wall exists between the funding sources and whom they hire as faculty members.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, there has been a growing trend in the religious studies in USA to study the religious pluralism of that country. UCSB also has a Pluralism project with W. Clark Roof as the Director. Grether was critical of the Pluralism project headed by Diana Eck of Harvard University which claims that USA is the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Although USA is a religiously pluralistic country, one cannot overlook the hegemony of Christian groups. Besides, all religious groups do not have the same political voice or access to media.

There is a growing trend towards the internationalization of Religious Studies in USA. However, Grether doubts whether it is internationalization in the real sense or an extension of “American imperialism,” that is, the “mono-cultural pluralism” of USA was influencing the study of religion in USA. She also talked about the “problem of deprivation” in religious studies in USA. The over-specialization or sub-specialization has separated religious studies from other departments (law, political science, history, etc.) and this has restricted cross-discipline interactions and also the scope of religious studies, thus encouraging imperialism or hegemony in US universities.

While speaking about the impediments to the Internationalization of Religious Studies in USA, Grether (herself a scholar of South Asian religion) narrated the instance when American scholars of South Asian studies had incurred the resentment of American-Indians because they felt that their culture was being misrepresented by American scholars. She raised the issue of who represents the “cultural other” and emphasized that this problem could be solved only through academic exchanges with scholars from other countries. She reiterated the suggestion by Ninian Smart that a World Academy of Religion (WAR) should be established, distinct from the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which would give greater priority to international participation.

American Academy of Religion (AAR)

Mary McGee, Director of the International Connections Committee of AAR, spoke about the initiative taken by AAR to promote international cooperation in religious studies. AAR, founded in 1909, is the largest learned society and professional association in the field of religion. It has about 10,000 members, out of

which 66% are regular members, 33% are student members and 12% are international members. These members are drawn from more than 1,500 colleges, universities, seminaries and schools in North America and abroad.

The International Connections Committee of AAR was established in 1996, to outreach scholars outside North America and thus increase the international dimension of this association. One of its objectives is to enhance awareness of the international context for the study of religion and to increase involvement in AAR by scholars and teachers from around the world. The committee sponsors special programs, communicates with scholars abroad, and extends hospitality to international attendees at the annual meeting.

The “International Focus” at the AAR Annual Meetings is one such initiative to “internationalize” AAR. Japan Focus was held at the 2003 AAR Annual Meeting in Atlanta, and it highlighted Japanese contribution to the study of religion. This was followed by focus on Latin America, Eastern Europe, and China. Other international initiatives by AAR are the internationalization of its publications (JAAR, *Religious Studies News*, etc.), translation grants for important works on religion in foreign languages, funding international travel of scholars to the Annual meeting, allocation of research grants, and collaboration with foreign institutes.

Concluding Remarks

The concluding remarks by Paul Swanson resonated the views of the participants of the workshop that religious studies should be recognized as inherently an international area of study. The internationalization of religious studies does not mean covering every country or every religion, rather it means being aware of the kind of research that is being carried out in religious studies in various countries. Hence, there was a general agreement to further enhance international cooperation through networking and information exchanges among scholars of religious studies, universities, and research institutions of the world. It was also suggested that a database of religious studies scholars willing to cooperate in international exchanges should be created and made available to all institutions involved in this project. Lack of funds was a common problem emphasized by all. The language barrier was another hurdle encountered in the internationalization of religious studies. The workshop recognized the need to publish in non-English languages and produce multi-lingual translations of major works in religious studies.