

## Sympathetic Understanding and Objective Observation

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### INTRODUCTION

When I had finished reading Bryan Wilson's paper on "The Academic Position of the Sociology of Religion in Modern Science," an event from my student years at the Department of Religious Studies at Tokyo University came spontaneously to mind. Professor Kishimoto Hideo, then chairman of the Department, told us about a certain student who wanted to give up his studies of religion. When Professor Kishimoto asked the reason for this, the student replied: "The scientific study of religion practised by our department seems to me to be a science which only criticizes and even refutes its object of research. I cannot be involved in a science that does not involve itself in its object of study." I do not clearly recall what Professor Kishimoto replied to the student, but do seem to remember that he told us that he felt he had been backed into a corner by the student's words.

I must, at that time, have found it a little hard to agree with either the student's excuse or the professor's reply. It was not more than a vague impression of mine, but at that time I myself did not feel that there was any atmosphere in our department of undue criticisms or refutations of religion. Moreover, I thought it a matter of course that one should put some distance from the object of study, since the scientific study of religion and the personal feelings one might have about religion were two different things, whether one might like this or not. Accordingly, the reply of Professor Kishimoto also seemed to me to be something

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of an overreaction.

Reading Wilson's paper, however, I became aware that my thoughts at that time were actually very superficial, and that there was a much deeper meaning in what Professor Kishimoto suggested to us than I ever realized. I fear now that the shallowness of my reaction to these important words of my professor had driven them from my memory. To borrow a phrase from Wilson, religion is a part of life itself, and it is the concrete individuals and groups who live in it, and so long as we do not deal with it in a sympathetic way it will be impossible for us to understand it correctly. On the other hand, a researcher of religion must maintain a value-free stance, which is to say, he must take care not to become personally involved in the particular religion he is studying, and he must make comparative investigations based on impartial measures. If he does not do this, the scientific nature of his research will be impaired.

Wilson's "sympathetic detachment" is a term that is, strictly speaking, very nearly antinomic. Wilson asserts, however, that this attitude is basic to the research of sociologists of religion and they have no other choice than to consciously adopt it. The gist of his paper is an enquiry into the type of personal stance that should be taken by the investigator in present-day scientific religious research. Or, to be more faithful to Wilson's message, it would perhaps be better to say, instead of the somewhat evaluative expression "should be taken," that in view of what religion is, a researcher's stance "cannot be anything else."

I think that most students of religion these days would agree with Wilson's proposal. His argument—that research on religion which begins from preconceptions critical or in refutation of religion is as equally scientifically flawed as the ideological acclamation of religion—can be said to be universally accepted.

Wilson's paper has been written to corroborate the appropriateness of such a scientific attitude. He first indicates the problematic points lying in the background of contemporary religious research by giving us a brief survey of the history of the sociology

of religion. Then he discusses the methods or procedures of scientific research and enumerates the conditions necessary for obtaining and assuring its scientific character. Finally, he considers the relationships between the sociology of religion and related disciplines, and attempts to assign his field of study to its proper place, illustrating the scientific attitude of sociologists of religion through a description of their concrete research procedures.

There might be some criticisms or modifications possible from different points of view concerning a few particular assertions in these three main "pillars" on which Wilson's paper rests. Yet I do not believe that, taken as a whole, any fundamental objections can be raised against his advice on the attitude that researchers must take. I, for one, can hardly imagine any heated discussion being initiated between proponents and opponents of his main thesis.

In fact, however, there are objections to Wilson's general theory of religion. This controversy is closely related to the question of "how to define religion," and has reached a kind of peak in particular regard to the "theory of the secularization of religion." Although the paper under discussion does not deal directly with secularization, it does contain, here and there, some assertions that on careful reading could lead to such a dispute. I prefer, however, not to deal explicitly with this topic here, and will refer to it only *en passant*, as it is a problem needing a separate discussion (see Nakamaki 1978, pp. 26-37).

I would like to approach Wilson's thought from two different aspects in this essay. First I will comment on his paper mainly to summarize his thesis in order to try to deepen our understanding of what he wants to convey to us. Secondly, I will depart from the contents of this paper and present his theory of sects, which actually constitutes the main field of research in which he is engaged. I will try to establish a link between his theories and the tasks of socio-religious research in Japan, with the aim of contributing to a wider internationalization of the scientific study of religion.

## SOCIOLOGY AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Wilson does not make a clear distinction between sociology proper and the sociology of religion. Since for him the sociology of religion is part and parcel of general sociology, and religious research has to be performed according to the methods of sociology, the sociology of religion is like a small circle subsumed in the wider circle that is general sociology. If we look, however, at how sociology came into being, we can see that it grew out of religion (Christianity), and that in the process of its becoming an autonomous discipline it increasingly developed a character as a field of study related to religion, whether its view of religion was positive or critical. We can say, therefore, that the sociology of religion—which is a small circle—and general sociology are in fact concentric circles in which the sociology of religion occupies the central position.

Wilson gives a general overview from the classical period of sociology, from Comte to Durkheim, and points out how theories of religion—from a broad sociological viewpoint—were largely critical of religion or tried to demonstrate its decline. With the appearance of functionalism this trend gradually turned to a more positive appreciation of the role of religion in society, but—according to Wilson—religion was seen primarily in terms of its functional efficiency (e.g. its role in social integration), and it was thought that even though religion still performed some functions, religion as an entity in which people found values for their lives would gradually disappear and eventually degenerate into nothing more than a sort of “useful fiction.”

Religion, Wilson says, is built from an encompassing linkage of the intellectual, evaluative and emotional levels of man. Even if a substitute for religion could be designated on each of these separate levels, they would not together add up to a full replacement for religion. In his words, “the social significance of religion has rather lain in the provision of categories and symbols that facilitate simultaneously man’s comprehension of his circumstances and his capacity to evaluate them and to cope with them

emotionally.”

This all-embracing character of religion is also reflected in the idiosyncratic nature of religious language. Indeed, religious language conveys simultaneously knowledge, evaluation and emotions. If, then, the specific character of religion is similar to this, it is difficult to understand religion only in terms of an abstract functionalist analysis. The only way to grasp it is through its real, living forms. This is why Wilson always attempts to view religion through the institutionalized forms in which it actually exists. Religion exists primarily in religious communities, and examples of it are “sects.”

How, then, does the sociology of religion attempt to elucidate as empirical phenomena those religions that surround us? It goes without saying that, as far as methodology is concerned, a line must be drawn separating on the one side sociology and other social sciences and on the other the natural sciences, which take natural phenomena as their object of study. Working from this assumption, Wilson gives the following conditions that must be met in order for a discipline to be called “science”:

1. empirical phenomena are to be investigated by objective methods;
2. impartial methods of measurement must be used;
3. the investigator must always maintain a distinct and self-conscious ethical neutrality;
4. he must deal with the data with an objective attitude; and
5. he must integrate individual phenomena into a general theory, building up a pure theoretical system that uses abstract conceptual terms.

In these conditions we can distinguish first items related to methodological problems (1 and 2), to the attitude of the researcher (3 and 4), and to the purpose of the research (5). Regarding this last point, Wilson calls sociology a “distilling discipline” since its purpose is to distill numerous data and reduce them to clearly-defined statements.

What Wilson primarily aims at in this paper, however, is the proposal of concrete research methods and, through this, the posing of the question of the attitude proper to the investigator in his research. "Methodology" might be too solemn a word to describe the contents of his paper, but the emphasis does lie in actual research procedures and the question of how to deal concretely with one's object of study. For example, he stresses the importance of interviews for collecting information, and points out the limited value of alternative procedures such as questionnaires.

In connection with the problem of data-gathering, Wilson asserts that, in order to maintain the scientific nature of his research, the sociologist should not be a religiously-committed person, at least not whilst practicing his sociology. Since, however, religion begins as a matter of personal interest, the gathering of data can be meaningful only if it is accompanied by a proper understanding of the beliefs and religious dispositions of the individual believers. In other words, the self-interpretations and understandings of the individual believers themselves constitute the basic data of religious research. This "methodological individualism," of course, must then be sublimated into typologies and sociological laws through a "distilling process" that will put the data into their social context.

What for the believers constitutes their "innermost feelings" is, for the researcher, "data." But, particularly in the case of an object of study so loaded with values and which requires from those who come into contact with it an explicit choice as religion does, it remains questionable whether we can content ourselves simply with speaking of "data." Yet, the researcher does need a detachment. He must refuse to get involved in choices between particular values and he must take an objective stance toward all religions, in impartial comparison.

On further reflection, however, it is also clear that it is impossible to deal objectively and impartially with religion in general if one does not have any understanding or empathy for any given

religion. Without these religion becomes a cold corpse. This is what Wilson expresses through the term "sympathetic detachment." This is an attitude that is difficult to obtain, but it is nonetheless possible to those who show boundless consideration for the believers and unrelenting self-reflection.

Taking the particular nature of religion into account, it is no wonder that many terms in sociological language are simply not adequate for dealing with religion. There are, for example, many cases in which it is difficult to express things religious in impersonal abstract terms. Sociologists of religion are therefore sometimes obliged to resort to literary expressions. To this general problem of terminology we should also add the problem that arises from the cultural bias inherited by the sociology of religion. As one might assume from the development of the sociology of religion, there are in the discipline many categories of analysis such as the distinctions between the sacred and the profane, this world and the other world, orthodoxy and heresy and the like, that have been drawn from Christian theological concepts. It is certainly not an easy task to break completely free from this Christian cultural background and to strive for a universal validity, but efforts should be continued to translate these heavily culturally biased words into more general terms according to the scientific principles of "impartiality," "ethical neutrality," and "objectivity." Wilson proposes that we adopt in a sympathetic way the terms used by individual believers, all the while attempting to give them a more objective content. This also implies translating these terms into words understandable to the general public, putting limits on the flood of unintelligible jargon, thus doing away with the "magical" character that religious terms, always prone to be hard to understand, often generate. This language problem is but one illustration of Wilson's intention to make the sociology of religion available to an ever-wider public.

In order to clarify the specific terrain of the sociology of religion, Wilson contrasts it with other disciplines that study religion, such as history, psychology, phenomenology and the so-called *Re-*

*ligionswissenschaft*. In so doing he asserts that the sociology of religion is a discipline that on the one hand locates the phenomenon of religion in its wider social context, and on the other engages in the interpretation of religious values, and adds that this means drawing a sharp line between “the sociology of religion” and what has been called “sociologie religieuse.” Although he does not abandon his goal of a deep sympathetic understanding of religion, here also Wilson maintains the necessity of an attitude of detachment. It is in this “frontier of tension” between sympathy and detachment that he continues his pursuit of the phenomenon of religion.

#### WILSON'S VIEWS OF RELIGION

In a review of Bryan Wilson's work, Donald E. Miller says:

If one were to risk classifying Wilson, it would surely be as a Weberian. His methods are inspired by Weber—especially his use of ideal types, his comparative interests, and his commitment to methodological individualism. And his moral concerns are those of Weber: rationalization and the consequences of a disenchanted world. As will be seen, however, his most recent argument on the cause of secularization is a direct imitation of Durkheim, although somewhat more ingeniously applied (Miller 1979, p. 162).

He further points out Marxian and Freudian influences in Wilson's work, though these are present to a much lesser degree.

Wilson seems to be influenced by Durkheim in that he approaches religion primarily in terms of its communitarian aspect. Just as Durkheim was of the opinion that the idea of religion is inseparable from that of “one single moral community called a Church,” religion for Wilson is also foremost a collective entity.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In his paper, Wilson criticizes Durkheim's functionalist view of religion. But I think that Miller is correct in noting points of resemblance between Durkheim and Wilson insofar as both take the collective forms of religion as the basis of their research.



Consequently, Wilson considers secularization to be the process whereby the influence of the Churches is increasingly reduced as a result of the rationalization of contemporary society. In sum, his basic point of view implies a close link between religion and the Churches, which are its institutional forms.

While the Churches are religious communities, they also possess, at the same time, social and cultural vitality. It is through this that they affirm their reason for existence. Following Weber's thought, Wilson finds in the Churches evidence of the ongoing rationalization of religious ethics that is resulting in "elimination of magic from the world."

The most typical examples of religious groups possessing clear institutional structures and existing in large part to preserve a rationalization of ethical values are the modern sects. We could say, then, that the central place Wilson gives to the study of sectarian movements is a natural consequence of his way of thinking. Although Wilson's "theory of sects" cannot be fully discussed here, I would like to at least point out that he deals with sects primarily in terms of their exclusivism—their emphasis on separateness—and that he has constructed a typology of them according to their "response to the world," which is one of rejection. As I have said, Wilson has always taken heed to build up a sociology of religion that has universal application. For example, in his first attempt at making a typology of sects he used as his criterion their "mission to the world." He became aware, however, of the Christian implications of the term "mission," and consequently changed this criterion to "response to the world," resulting in a large modification of the content itself as well as the typology. He says that the soteriology of the sects was rooted in their rejection of the world, and that it had an ethical impact on the traditional society, heavily imbued with magic, and that it bore within itself the possibility of acting as an explosive, triggering social reform. It is from this viewpoint that he has turned his attention to the activities of the sectarian movements in the third world countries of today. In a word, if the ethics of the sects

can present us with a new way of looking objectively at society, this also means that it is possible to promote the establishment of new social ethics in non-Christian areas.

As Wilson himself admits, however, the concept of "sect" has emerged from a background of Christian culture, and there are consequently limits to its application to religious groups of other cultural areas. And the problem is apt to be reduced to the question of the influence of Christianity even in considerations of the validity of the ethics of the sects from non-Christian areas. I would think, therefore, if we are to pull the sociology of religion free from its Christian heritage and give it a wider universality, we need frames of reference able to analyse the various existing societies and cultures in their own terms. Through an international dialogue based on such analysis a common ground can be established; there is no other way of establishing one.

The sociology of religion in Japan is still very much engaged in the assimilation of Western theories and research. On the other hand, however, some attempts have begun to speak a language rooted in Japan's religious climate. A concrete example of this is the research being done on Japanese religious groups, and in particular those attempts at typification on the one hand and the study of the ethos of Japan's new religious movements on the other. These can be considered responses to the challenges of Wilson's theory of religious communities that are focused on sectarian movements and his views of religious ethics.

The theories of religion focused on the *ie* ("household") proposed by Morioka Kiyomi and Yanagawa Keiichi are a good example of the first point, even if there are some individual differences in their respective perspectives. For example, Yanagawa attempts to see the *ie* as the basic unit of Japanese religious groupings (Yanagawa 1980). This implies, of course, a departure from Christian forms of faith which are, in principle, based on a personal faith commitment. A typology in terms of "church" and "sect" can therefore hardly be applied to the Japanese religious world, since "churches" and "sects" are religious groupings that

differ sharply from those—like those in Japan—that are identical to natural groupings. A typology of religions in Japan would, indeed, feature poles at which the religious groups were based either on the *ie* or the *mure* (“cluster,” “multitude”). Between these two poles we could locate groups such as the *danka shūdan* (“Buddhist parishioners’ group”), *ujiko shūdan* (“Shinto parishioners’ group”), *kō shūdan* (“cult group”), *matsuri shūdan* (“festival group”) and the like. The criterion that brings these groups into existence is human relationships, and it is therefore naturally accepted that, according to the changing modes of human relationships, one can hold different beliefs in gods and buddhas.

The work of a group of young Japanese sociologists of religion needs to be mentioned here in regard to the question of religious ethics.<sup>2</sup> These scholars have adopted Wilson’s theories in a critical way and have set out on a study of the vitalistic conception of salvation in Japan’s new religious movements. They see the ethos of these religions in the links between this-worldly benefits and salvation, and have tried to give their theories an application that will surpass the limits of Japan.

#### CONCLUSION

We could perhaps say that the sociology of religion will from this point definitely aim at becoming a true scientific discipline. This does not mean, of course, that the fruits hitherto harvested by the sociology of religion have not been excellent. The relationships between religion and society, however, have been carved out over a long period in each area of the world, and it is increasingly necessary to develop analytical devices appropriate to the social and cultural backgrounds of each of these areas. If I may once again borrow an expression from Wilson, these analytical devices are data, and through the distillation of these data we can build up a more general socio-religious theory. However diversified

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2. See, for example, Tsushima 1979. An important contribution has also been made to the sociology of religion in Japan by Inoue 1981.

our analytical methods and theorizations may become, though, the “attitude of sympathetic detachment” proposed by Wilson for scientific research will, I think, never lose its permanent value.

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