

The Study of Religion and The Tradition of Pluralism

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TOWARD A *RELIGIONSWISSENSCHAFT* "POSITION"

Since beginning my study of *Religionswissenschaft*, one of the topics that has often come up in discussions with colleagues is that of whether the discipline could have its own particular scholarly position. My opinion on this varied from discussion to discussion, but at the moment I believe, in my own idiosyncratic way, that a *Religionswissenschaft* "position" is indeed possible. I am afraid, however, that my position is not so clearly defined as that of Bryan Wilson's in the sociology of religion.

Wilson sees his sociology as the system of knowledge which supports all the research and methodology that he and his colleagues engage in. Sociology possesses a set of fundamental principles proper to science; it contains an agreed-upon system that constitutes the basis of the endeavors of scholars with a diversity of cultural backgrounds, and it has a sufficient depository of classical research to which current scholarship should constantly strive to return. Sociology is the cooperative effort of a clearly-outlined group, composed of people who have mastered those elements, and it is therefore possible to assume a clear position when one undertakes sociological research.

Is such a position available for *Religionswissenschaft*? The fundamental principles of my own research are always unclear; there are not really sufficient points of agreement among the scholars in the field, and the study results we use for our reference points come rather from other academic disciplines. The re-

Translated by W. Michael Kelsey and Jan Swyngedouw from "Shūkyō to tagenshugi no dentō" 宗教と多元主義の伝統. *Tōyō gakujutsu kenkyū* 東洋学術研究 20/2 (1981), pp. 73-82.

search we specialists in *Religionswissenschaft* conduct often neglects to provide sufficient evidence, resulting in a lack of accumulated results; there is thus a real fear that our research attitudes will fall into dilettantism. We are constantly being criticized by our colleagues in related disciplines that *Religionswissenschaft* is not independent yet as a discipline and is still in its infantile stage, and there is nothing we can do but put up with such criticisms. This doubtless means that *Religionswissenschaft* has yet to develop anything like a real position for itself.

This state of affairs, however, is not entirely without its good side. Interdisciplinary research, for example, is a self-evident premise of *Religionswissenschaft*. When a researcher is not bound by the restraints of any particular academic field he is able to freely ingest the fruits of a variety of disciplines. Efforts to bring the highly specialized concepts of each discipline into a broader frame of common understanding are also born of such a state of affairs. Further, there is less danger of falling into a trivial scholasticism bound up in the treatment of very detailed problems and based on the many preconceptions of one's academic discipline. If it is possible to give shape to a coming to grips with religion different from that of related disciplines, while at the same time maintaining the profits of such liberation and anti-formalism, can one then not claim the establishment of a new type of "position?"

This "independent" coming to grips with religion in *Religionswissenschaft* differs from that of related disciplines and can be conceived, for example, as being the sum total of the following endeavors:

- a. Aiming for harmony and integration of the hermeneutic and social-scientific trends in the related disciplines.
- b. Expanding our horizons to include primitive and folk religions as well as historical religions and salvation religions, and to inquire into the nature of the relationships between the two.
- c. Further developing our knowledge of the pluralism and rel-

ativity of the various religious traditions.

Above I have set forth, as they occurred to me, those elements of *Religionswissenschaft* that I think can be called characteristic. I think it is likely that the "position" of *Religionswissenschaft* will be clarified more fully by the clarification of the content and the interdependency of these endeavors.

Looking at Wilson's pronouncement of the position of the sociology of religion in the light of the "position" expressed above, I am particularly drawn by his ideas concerning the relationships between sociology and the Western religious tradition. While these have some bearing on my point "c" above, they also demand our attention in any consideration of the relationships between *Religionswissenschaft* and Japanese religious traditions. The very fact that we can link in this way a single academic discipline's "position" to a cultural tradition different from that of the West is appropriate, I think, to a discipline that has a position that is not developed as one branch of Western science. In what follows, I will attempt to provide a rough sketch of a "position" different from that of Wilson, concentrating primarily on religious tradition and the tradition of research on religion in Japan.

OBJECTIVITY AND PLURALISM

Wilson begins his discussion of the position of the sociology of religion with an explanation of the tension between the forms of knowledge (world views) of religion and science. Because sociology originally began as a form of rational knowledge of society to replace the Christian knowledge of society it includes rationalistic values meant to replace those of religion. Wilson says that this is one of the reasons that religion has been such an important theme in sociology as well as the source of many difficulties for the sociology of religion. That is, in spite of the fact that the sociology of religion has promoted an objective knowledge that brackets the problem of value judgments, it has nonetheless been unable to avoid the fact that on the level of values it comes into

conflict with religion.

Although recent scholars such as Wilson doubt that scientific knowledge of society is immediately linked to the realization of a more prosperous society with no religious superstitions, they still cannot but recognize that there is a conflict between science and religion. That Wilson constantly repeats his claims of objectivity and detachment is probably due to his intention to eliminate this conflict by relegating science and religion to completely different levels. Ironically, however, the more he repeats his claims of objectivity and detachment the better we can see that his is the figure of a person located in the tradition of religious skepticism.

The objective study of religion need not necessarily involve a constant conflict or tension between the two as the central factor of its development. There exists as well in Western study of religion a trend versed in anthropology and ethnology that is supposed to have come into existence through a focusing on the discovery of foreign cultures and the relativization of Christianity that accompanied this discovery. This trend has, naturally enough, extended into sociology as well, and that Wilson completely fails to touch on it shows, I fear, that he has perhaps defined sociology in too narrow a way. Even so, however, there is no denying the fact that this conflict and tension make up one of the main motifs in the scientific study of religion in the West.

In Japan, however, we have no tradition of a one-dimensional orthodoxy such as Christianity was in the West, and in the Japanese cultural context this state of affairs is completely different. Excepting the Marxism of a certain historical period, I do not think that Japanese social sciences have developed in such a strict state of conflict with religion. Indeed, as the reception of Max Weber in Japan typically shows us, the reception here of the social sciences has even been an expression of commitment to the values of Western civilization and Christianity (even if expressed in a secularized form) which make up the background of the social sciences.

This is one example of the point made by Maruyama (1961), that ideas based on different principles have not, in Japanese intellectual history, come into conflict with past ideas but have rather been absorbed one after another. As Maruyama has said, this is doubtless linked to the fact that Japan all but lacks an intellectual tradition that had the strength to serve as a coordinate axis in its intellectual history. Speaking in general terms about science and religion, when Western science was introduced here Japan did not have any religious thought that monopolized intellectual authority and was in tension and opposition to that science. The main reason for this can be found in the fact that a number of religious traditions existed here pluralistically, and in point of fact largely eroded any religious world view of an absolute nature. Maruyama Masao would probably call this the expression of an intellectual "mixed residence" and a "tradition" of non-structure, and decry it as intellectual barrenness and weakness.

Seen from the point of view of research on religion, at least, however, this pluralistic co-existence of traditions must be counted a favorable state of affairs. Even though we might call the prohibition of Christianity a typical factor indicating the limits of this miscellaneous pluralism, one cannot deny the fact that after that prohibition Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism had visible existences and were seen as competing with one another for precedence. Christianity is added to this list of co-existing religions after the Meiji restoration, and one finds a strong consciousness of the co-existence of two large cultural entities—that is, Western and Eastern civilizations—both of which were based on religion. The relativity of religious traditions is a self-evident premise for such a co-existence. Even though there was not any total confrontation among these various religious traditions, however, there were notable attempts toward mutual criticism, eclecticism and a search for common goals. It is unnecessary to point out that this inevitably included the seeds of comparison and of objective observation. This could be called a pluralistic objectivity,

and it differs from the objectivity stressed by Wilson, which is based on scientific methodology. Accordingly, the conditions necessary for objective religious research existed in Japan before science and also before the dramatic "discovery of foreign cultures."

It was Katō Shūichi who first brought to our attention the possibility of a hybrid culture that could grow from this pluralistic tradition (Katō 1974). Even though those vulgar, pluralistic combinations that tend to be born from the fringes of civilization may lack any coherent principle or systematization, it is probably true that they are able to attain a high level of cultural achievement unreachable by the pure-blood. If the pluralistic co-existence of religions can be seen as having produced an original, pluralistic study of religion, then that should be taken as a verification of the possibility of a hybrid culture. In point of fact, the buds of such religious research were beginning to open as early as the middle of the Edo period.

THE TRADITION OF PLURALISTIC RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

That there is a pluralistic co-existence of religions is a fact true of the greater part of the religious histories of East Asia. The mere fact that terms such as "Confucianism-Buddhism-Taoism," or "Shinto-Confucianism-Buddhism" have come to be widely used doubtless indicates a cultural tradition that sees religions in a pluralistic way. It is only natural that such conditions would from an early period have inspired debates among the various religions, and that scholars have appeared who have attempted to consider the various religions comparatively. This trend has existed in Japan as well as other parts of Asia, and we can see Kūkai's *Sangō shiki* ("The teachings of the three religions," 797) as one expression of it.

This academic trend, however, is not linked directly to the position of modern *Religionswissenschaft*. As long as scrupulous comparisons of the various religions are being made, they will certainly include perspectives such as recognition of relativity,

objective viewpoints and the like. When, however, these are based entirely on an intention to create controversy, or, to carry it a step further, when their point is to show that "the three religions are the same," then they have yet to become the foreshadowing of an original position proper to *Religionswissenschaft*. Such arguments must be seen, rather, as being one form of some claim made from the individual theorist's religious or theological position. It is during the Edo period in Japan that elements such as recognition of relativity and objective perspectives began to mature and take the forms that clearly pre-figure what they have become today. We can, I think, list the names of Ishida Baigan (1685–1744) and Tominaga Chūki (1715–1746) as Edo period precursors of such religious research.¹ Below I would like to present a rough outline of the similarities in thought in the works of these two men from the perspective of them as being precursors of modern *Religionswissenschaft*.

1. *Religious traditions are the object of an equal level of concern.* Both of these men owed their scholarly backbone to Confucian studies (or Confucian dogmatics). Chūki, however, by writing treatises critical of Confucianism (*setsuhei*), established his own scholarly position through his discovery of an academic style free from Confucianism. On the other hand, Baigan respected Shinto and Buddhism in his own maturation process, and was influenced by them; in his experience of enlightenment that was responsible for his own position, moreover, there is a conspicuous influence of Zen, and in his later years he gradually shed most of his Confucian coloring. One of the most important of their claims is that the three religions—Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism (adding Taoism, this comes to four religions)—needed to be treated on equal levels. To reverse this statement, their religious research was not based on the fixed position of any particular re-

1. I would like to thank Prof. Michael Pye of the University of Leeds, England, from whom I have learned a good deal about the significance of Tominaga Chūki as a precursor of modern *Religionswissenschaft*.

ligious tradition.

2. *The various religious traditions are limited by the historical and cultural geographical conditions of their maturation.* Both of these men were strongly aware of the fact that these religions were based on what in India and China were self-evident truths which became the premise of each individual religion, but that in many cases these truths did not correspond to Japanese realities. Such problems also extended (especially in Japan) to the relationships between the past and the present. That Chūki, investigating the historical development of Buddhism and Confucianism, identified the “proclivities” in each religion as being, namely, “magic” in Buddhism, “rhetoric” in Confucianism and “the hiding of things” in Shinto, is an expression of the keenness of his perceptions. In the face of claims that religion is a universal truth, Chūki’s critical posture, based on the observation that the forms of people’s lives are pluralistic, is conspicuous. Baigan, on the other hand, exhibits the form of one who is attempting to identify the fundamental truth of each religion from the cultural restrictions placed on that religion.

3. *One aspect of the doctrinal structure of each religious system is that it includes elements that deviate from the truth.* Both men looked on mere intellectual refinement or complication of doctrine, and on the development of religious scholasticism, with suspicious and critical eyes. Baigan criticized the study of ideas exclusively as a part of doctrinal systems as being “book study” (the discipline of “letter craftsmen”), removed from the realities of the everyday world and experience, and attempted to stitch together a method of searching out the truth that could replace this. Chūki explained the development of the doctrinal system of each religion as having taken its motive from a desire to add something new to existing ideas, in order to overcome them. For him the main problem in research on religious thought was to search out those points at which each religion had aimed at such “overcomings.” One

point of interest in Chūki is that criticism of a doctrinal system is not criticism made from another type of knowledge system, but was directed against the totalitarian, authoritarian character of a doctrinal system that tended to be the result of systematic knowledge itself.

Points 2 and 3 above have much in common with enlightened ways of thought that are critical of religion, but it should be stressed that they grew up with no connection to the formulation of scientific systems that took as their model the natural sciences.

4. *The teaching of each of the religions contains fundamental truth, and should be adopted with individual experience as its standard.* A major premise of scholarship in the Edo period was that its purpose was to make the proper way to live obvious, and both of these men worked under this premise. It is clear that for Chūki the purpose of scholarship was to clarify the “way of truth” (*makoto no michi*), and this he did primarily through criticisms of the various religions; the claim that religions should be positively adopted does not come to the fore in his work. Baigan, on the other hand, was interested in grasping the nucleus of truth, the “knowing of one’s own mind” (*kokoro wo shiru*), and thus said that if one made this his standard he could learn freely from any of the religions, a claim he made repeatedly, in a positive sense. Both men saw the standard of truth as residing in the “self,” and both took this “self” as the basic place for meeting with the various traditions.

5. *The truth found in all religions must be understood on the level of the morality of the common people.* In the face of the tendency of contemporaneous scholarship to see the acquisition of religious truth as resulting from a high level of knowledge, a special religious training, or a mysterious revelation, both of these men rejected such views and strove to find truth in the actual daily lives of the lower-class common people. Chūki’s “way of truth” was found in common sense life practice: “Merely treat everything

in the most appropriate way; concern yourself primarily with the tasks of today; make your heart straight; have correct deportment; keep your words calm; observe discretion in your actions . . .” (Testament of an Old Man). Baigan consistently contrasts knowledge that plays a role in the lives of the people with “book study” and goes so far as to establish a central method for the seeking of truth that involves a dialogue about concrete ethical problems connected with daily life.

The ways of thinking revealed in points 4 and 5 are reflections of the growth and of the ethical awareness accompanying self-confidence of the townsmen classes to which both men belonged. It is not necessary to note that popular thought today can trace its heritage to the spirit of these townsmen.

If we compare points 1 through 5 above with the three points concerning the view of the “position” of *Religionswissenschaft* that I outlined in the first section of this paper, we can see that, in addition to providing various kinds of foundations concerning point “c,” there are also elements in points 2 and 5, in particular, that suggest the trends found in “a” and “b.” I have, I think, proven the hypothesis that the tradition of pluralistic research on religion in Japan is connected to the “position” of modern *Religionswissenschaft*.

It is not, of course, true that after Baigan and Chūki this way of thinking has formed a great current and is still being transmitted today. The main academic currents in religion during the Tokugawa period were studies of the doctrines of the religions, and in the modern period they have been adaptations of Western theology and social sciences. I think, however, that along with these currents, or perhaps even within them, we can also find the transmission of ways of thinking similar to those of Baigan and Chūki, even if only in fragmented form. There is, then, in my opinion, a need to link the accomplishments of the pioneer modern religious scholars such as Anesaki Masaharu and Yanagita Kunio to the traditions stemming from Baigan and Chūki.

THE AMBIGUITY OF PLURALISTIC RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

If one depicts the "position" of *Religionswissenschaft* along the lines of a tradition such as outlined above, and then attempts to line it up with the various problems posed by Wilson, this "position" might come to be thought of as not only presently unformed, but also as essentially embracing an ambiguity. It does not, for example, have the clear individual sense of purpose of theology or science. A theologian would have as his goal the re-formulation of the religion's faith into some form appropriate to modern intellectual circumstances, and the scientist would have as his goal the accumulation of more correct information concerning human beings or society using religion as data. These goals constitute one part of the particular goal of the pluralistic study of religion. If one wonders, however, what is precisely the "central" goal of the pluralistic study of religion itself, the reply must out of necessity become rather vague.

Also, when the researcher is connected with a certain religion, the reason for his connection with this religion will also be rather vague. It is, of course, possible for a person engaged in the pluralistic study of religion to have some kind of belief. As a researcher concerned with a certain religion, however, as far as he is concerned this religion is just one out of many, and there is no particular reason for him to be connected with it. On the other hand, to him the religion is not—as it would be to a scientist—a mere example; it is rather a tradition that has some connection with his own individual identity. This "some kind of connection" will gradually become clear through his research, but there will doubtless be many cases in which it is difficult to give a clear answer.

Such ambiguity is doubtless connected with the ambiguity of the "common people's morality" listed in point 5 of the preceding section as being at the base of the truth of all religions. The very nature of the experience of "knowing one's own mind" that Baigan held to be the touchstone of his own ideas defies clear expression. Or there is Chūki's "way of truth," which was a way

of living based on common sense, but it is quite difficult to put common sense into the clearly established form of a "position." The meeting with the various traditions from the base of such "experience" or "common sense" calls forth an ambivalent attitude in which criticism and bewilderment are mixed with sympathy. This differs from what Wilson calls "sympathetic detachment," and includes the dual value judgments of respect and criticism; it will continuously involve the opportunity for controversy to arise with the various traditions.

The ambiguity of the "position" of the pluralistic study of religion is weak in that it cannot clearly establish its principles, but it can also have a positive meaning in that it can cope with the problems forced upon us by contemporary culture. This, in short, is because the pluralistic co-existence of religious traditions, along with the co-existence of religious world views and scientific world views, or the co-existence of ideologies, is the intellectual situation in most parts of the modern world. Japanese culture, which has sought its salvation in the absorption of the traditions of the various great civilizations, might be said to have anticipated contemporary conditions a long time ago. Given contemporary conditions, the best way of living is not to pledge oneself to one certain kind of position, but rather to seek one's own, vague, individual "position" among the positions that are possible. I think the pluralistic study of religions is connected with such a way of life.

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