

A Riposte

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That my essay should have aroused so much comment and criticism is itself a source of gratification, as is the opportunity to respond to those who have generously given their time to discussing that piece of work, to enhancing such strengths as it may have and to exposing its weaknesses.

Morioka Kiyomi brings out the complexity of an attitude of sympathetic detachment. To work with a religious group is to expose one's nerve and to risk the arousal of simultaneous or alternate feelings of attraction and antipathy. The investigator may find himself—typically in evangelical Christian groups—directly addressed in emotional terms in a highly-charged atmosphere. It is a matter of discipline—ultimately of his scholarly, academic discipline—not to lose sight of the academic values which occasion his being in such a situation. We cannot, as Morioka indicates, be content with Renan's prescription, which fails to even perceive the possibility of self-conscious commitment to ethical neutrality and the posture of sympathetic detachment. Like so many theologically trained men of his time, he was not able to transcend normative positions.

Morioka takes up the issue of the relative applicability of Western concepts in the analysis of religion in Japan. Sociologists have long been wedded—sometimes unwittingly—to the view that sociology should canvass a comprehensive, general theory applicable to every specimen of the genus *society*. Inevitably any such theory has to be set forth without reference to cultural particularities and in terms of the highest abstraction and generality. Such formulations may have their merits, but they do little to stimulate empirical research or to inform us of social reality, even though, ideally, they might provide us with categories by which to order our research results. But the socially significant—and

perhaps the intellectually most demanding—problems do not arise at the level of abstract theory but at a level of analysis in which empirical evidence and theoretical formulations meet. This is, I think, the level Morioka describes as that of a cultural area which embraces several national cultures. As he says, sociology has produced formulations which, in greater or lesser degree, cover the range of relevant material for a group of national cultures in the West (although that no one should ignore the significant variations among these cultures is also evident—*vide*, David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

I am in accord with Morioka, too, with respect to the conceptual language which sociology needs. Since our basic assumptions imply the comparability of social processes that occur in different cultural contexts, and since we recognize a range of problems, dilemmas, and tensions which every society must at least contain, if not resolve, so we must have recourse to terms which are themselves as free as possible from the specific connotations and evocations which are implicit in both the everyday language of any society and the specialist terms of normative disciplines (particularly theology, but also, and I mention them because they are sometimes concerned with religious issues, law and medicine). The history of sociology has, however, precluded the possibility of coining all our own terms: we have inherited a vast and heterogeneous array of concepts and categories, some of which were originally quite particular to given phenomena, and which, despite their incongruous connotations, have become established in sociological literature. Among such terms one may readily cite: *church*; *sect*; *priest*; *community*; *millennium*; *messianism*; *charisma*, and those which Akaike Noriaki mentions in his paper—*sacred*; *profane*; *orthodoxy* and *heresy*.

Akaike makes explicit the inapplicability of some of these terms by exemplifying the different assumptions which may underlie Japanese religious collectivities from those built into concepts of *church* and *sect*. It may well be that even in application to

Western phenomena, the assumptions have undergone change, and that although, for example, church structure persists in some recognizable continuity with its traditional form, none the less, the connotations of the term *church* need to be re-examined. Personal faith and commitment are indeed requirements in Christianity, but those demands may have been less powerful for the ordinary layman before the intensification of individualism at the Reformation. As individuation increased in subsequent Western history, and as freedom of choice became increasingly admissible as the basis of religious commitment, so, especially in nineteenth century evangelicalism, the normative expectation of personal commitment was intensified. Before the Reformation, the layman need only conform, do as his neighbours did, accept religion much as he accepted custom. Intense personal commitment was not required—and, indeed, for those who felt such extraordinary religiosity, there were institutionalized opportunities in the monasteries (not that by any means all of those who took such vows were necessarily particularly religious, of course). The demand for intense personal faith within Christendom was largely of sectarian inspiration, stemming from Christianity's own origins as a sect which recruited self-selected individuals. That demand found subsequent reinforcement in the process of individuation which Protestantism facilitated. Today, the de-structuration of the major churches—Roman, Anglican, and Protestant—perhaps demands that critical attention be paid to the assumptions built into the concept of *church*. Church organization is being re-modelled, and simultaneously ideas of salvation, religious purpose, and religious action are exposed to new, and sometimes radically new, influences.

Araki Michio takes me to task on a number of issues. First I should make clear that the title of my paper was not one of my own choosing, although I am fully persuaded of the relevance of its contents. Perhaps Araki misunderstands my position in some respects. I seek to set out the history of sociological methodology,

which was—and is still—deeply influenced by the natural sciences, most emphatically in Comte but also in the work of Max Weber. I cite Comte, Saint-Simon, Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Freud et al. to indicate the diverse origins of the discipline. How could anyone accept all of these proponents of irreconcilable theories uncritically? How can Araki with any seriousness accuse me of doing so? To recount a discipline's development is not to endorse its every step. My purpose was not to provide a critique but to trace a tradition, not to extol virtues, but to expose problems. To acknowledge the history of one's discipline and one's debt to one's forebears is not, surely, a discreditable thing to do. To strive quite self-consciously for objectivity, to commit oneself to the integrity of academic discipline, to give weight to empirical evidence, and to develop rationally a systematic body of theory, are canons that a sociologist cannot abandon. They may be "old-fashioned," but consider the alternatives—subjectivity, bias, whimsicality, fantasy and internal contradiction. I know of no defence of these as methods of study. My account duly recognizes the importance of the concept of *Verstehen*, the attempt to comprehend the subjective meanings—the experience, emotions and evaluations as well as the intellectual constructs of those engaged in religion. These are also part of the evidence of the sociologist, although I half-gather the impression that the very idea of "evidence" is an affront to Araki.

It cannot be gainsaid—and far from gainsaying it, I have, here and elsewhere, emphasized—that the sociology of religion suffers limitations. One set of limitations arises from the fact that sociology developed in Western culture. Its concepts and methods bear the imprint of that culture. No sociologist would claim that sociology was entirely value-free (and if Araki will read my essay again, he will see that I have not done so). As in the natural sciences, the choice of problems, and the selection of data imply evaluations. But the sociologist seeks (1) to be aware that there are value-commitments; (2) carefully to delimit their influence; (3) to acknowledge, in the collection and interpretation of data, the

supreme value of scientific integrity.

In trying to make clear the extent to which the sociology of religion is “in captivity to its concepts—concepts of Western provenance” (p. 36) I explicitly make a point the exact opposite of which Araki charges against me. Nor do I take Western society as an exemplar, but is Araki really angry because of the incontrovertible fact that sociology developed in the West?

Nowhere have I said that religion is “old-fashioned” (the term is used several times by Araki), but only that religion is an older perspective than that of science, and provided men with a worldview which antedates that of sociology. There is no need here to marshal the abundant evidence respecting the attenuation of the social functions of religion, the diminution in religious observances, or the decline in the social influence and status of religious functionaries.

All of this Araki regards as evidence of “scientific dogma.” The term is no more than a rhetorical device: as I understand the scientific approach, its propositions are couched in terms that render them falsifiable. “Faith in science” is an equally questionable term, since science depends implicitly not on faith but on doubt, on the recurrent possibility of subjecting findings, methods, and assumptions to renewed scrutiny. To the conviction that empirical methods are appropriate to the investigation of social phenomena, I will, of course, plead guilty, allowing that those methods can never exhaust social phenomena or explain everything.

Araki twice avers that I “want to replace religion with the sociology of religion”: and here he appears to confuse my account of the dispositions of some of the early sociologists with something said on my own behalf. My “wants” are quite irrelevant to the account I seek to give. If they have crept in (and I find no evidence of it) then that is a matter of academic negligence, but does Araki so little understand ethical neutrality that he supposes that a person’s personal preferences are always overriding motivations?

At various points, I am indicted as an “old-fashioned” evolutionist

or an "old-fashioned" functionalist. I am not flattered to be labelled a functionalist, and do not consider myself such, but let me defend their honour. Functionalist analysis is only one possible basis for sociological explanation, but given the difficulty of producing causal analysis of complex phenomena, functional propositions provide one way of relating phenomena one to another, or of relating the particular to the general (which is what we generally mean when we say "explaining"). I know of no functionalists who are guilty of what Araki accuses them, that is of regarding the unintended consequences of religion to be its causes. Most functionalists would, I believe, acknowledge that causal analysis more nearly fits the general desiderata of scientific method (and I am delighted to see, if I understand him aright, that Araki endorses, however backhandedly, this aspect of scientific method). Where we can reveal causes, clearly we should do so, and I should like to think that, in some modest degree, some of my own work has attempted to do just that.

Does the loss of social functions mean the decline of religion? Assuming that one could specify carefully the terms of such a proposition, one might subject it to empirical test. That the two have occurred in close sequence seems well attested in many historical instances: of course, if causes could be properly investigated, that might provide something of the causal explanation which Araki (and most sociologists with him) would like to see.

If (on p. 69) Araki is saying that I am merely a man of my time; conditioned by a social milieu; influenced, perhaps in part shaped, by prevailing intellectual currents, then I salute his (unacknowledged) espousal of the central tenets of sociological determinism (as expounded in the sociology of knowledge) and wonder why, in the sociology of religion, a similar determinism occasions him such anguish. Pleading guilty to belonging to my own time and my own culture, I might ask—in mitigation—who does not? Perhaps the exponents of the universal vision of *Religionswissenschaften*?

When Araki says that if "we divest religious phenomena of

their social aspects it is impossible to see religion as an integrated whole" (p. 66), I agree with him, but I do not see the symmetry of religion, on the one hand, and society, on the other, which that sentence appears to imply. What religious phenomena are there which are not social phenomena? There are abundant social phenomena which cannot, by any stretch of the normal usage of language, be labelled "religious." Araki wishes to explain "religion as religion" (p. 70). I am not clear what that means. What, one must ask, does Araki mean by "religion," what are the empirical referents of this abstract concept? To explain must mean to relate one thing to others, to relate cases to generalities or to abstract principles, or to comparable cases. To "explain religion as religion" seems to evacuate every vestige of meaning from the verb "to explain."

In enunciating his second problem, Araki underestimates sociologists. In no discipline has there been more acute concern to become self-conscious about premises and implicit value-judgements. If sociologists have failed, it has not been for want of thought, time, and ink devoted to these matters. It is, in respect of this point—in itself revealing of Araki's framework of thought—that he categories the list of attributes he selects as representing my view of religion and science as, respectively, "negative" and "positive." I am intrigued to contemplate what is negative about the subjective, the irrational, the voluntary, or the amateur. These terms are merely attempts to designate factual characteristics. Only a mind steeped in a strongly normative orientation to the world, immersed in praise-blame dichotomies, would designate comparative facticities as value propositions. The continuing paragraphs betray a totally normative interpretation of categories which appears to disallow the possibility of any attempt at neutral comparative categorization.

Araki contends that I do not "take up matters from *their* side" (as he describes the perspective of religionists, although the idea of "sides" suggests a contest, which has never remotely occurred to me as a way to describe scholarly research). He ignores my

advocacy of sympathy, and my attempts in my earlier work (in immodestly referring to which Araki's kind allusions provide me with excuse) to give due place to the self-interpretation of religious groups. I have made this requirement a canon of methodology for myself. If I have failed to grasp the meaning from "their side," this is a deficiency on my part, but it is one that has not occurred because I have thought self-interpretation to be unimportant. Fortunately, religionists have not infrequently told me that I have understood them very well.

The extent of social intercourse needed in studying a religious group is a matter to which I have given much thought. Araki suggests that one's detachment limits this intercourse to the extent "needed for the collection of material" (p. 73). He declares this *a priori*. It does not conform to my empirical experience with the dozen movements with which I have attempted sociological study. It might distress Araki, with his surprisingly firm conviction of my scientism, if I were to say that in some respects studying a religious group (and perhaps any group that has a distinctive cultural life of its own) is rather like painting a picture—one never quite knows when one has finished. There is no way of attaining completeness, and the intercourse may continue long after the study is over.

Let me take up the idea that religious phenomena differ from secular elements, since the latter "take place purely on the human plane" (p. 74). Is it implied that if one does not perceive or experience the super-human plane one cannot understand religious groups? If so, will any super-human experience suffice? What if one's experience profoundly contradicts the claims of the group one is studying? How does one measure the adequacy of experience which is trans-human? Is this seriously offered to us as a basis for scholarly research?

The question "Have you ever been changed through your dealings with these various religious phenomena?" might open the door to a wide range of comment. If one were to allow every religious claim to change one, what would happen to the integrity

of academic discipline? One might be affected by the groups one studies, but one does not engage with it as a potential convert. To be converted is to abandon one's academic integrity for the sake of a different (I do not say worse) integrity. Araki persists in assertions that do not represent my position. I do not claim to have "explained religion" or to have made "a picture of religion." My concerns have been with religious groups, with social phenomena and social experience. Whether the results are superficial, I must leave others to judge, and I am myself content with the judgement of many of the religious groups with which I have worked—judgements from "their side."

My problem with Araki's advocacy is to know what constitutes the "correct understanding" of which he is so assured, but the content of which he does not vouchsafe to us. I myself doubt all such final "correct" pronouncements (and do not even endorse the abstract concept "the truth" which he ascribes to me). What I also doubt is that he has any alternative to the investigation of empirical phenomena in an objective spirit of detachment, with self-conscious awareness of one's own values and, as far as possible, of one's own limitations. I do not accept that a creature *homo religiosus* antedates man as a social being: where, without society, should we find religion?

The "universal horizon" is a metaphor to which my imagination and my poor dependence on locality and temporality will not stretch. The designation of everybody as "religious" seems to me to defy the purpose of having the category at all, but, no doubt, in that ultimate utopia, categories and scholarship will all be done away.

Of the categories that will then become redundant, perhaps, are those which distinguish divergent religions, since being "religious" will be enough. What would be lost in any such inchoate religiosity would be the benefit which Shimazono Susumu credits to the condition of pluralism and competition. Mutual criticism, eclecticism and the search for common goals might indeed produce

—perhaps did produce—a body of religious discourse. Whether such discourse would, of itself, satisfy the normal conditions of academic inquiry would doubtless vary with the prevailing principles of scholarship. But co-existence in itself is certainly not enough to ensure detached objectivity. Much must depend on the claims which a religion makes for itself: thus, the co-existence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Middle Eastern countries has not notably encouraged disinterested and dispassionate study. Beginning with normative premises they have readily judged other religions in terms of the absolute and unalterable truth which each one of them has claimed to possess, whilst internal commentaries by religious votaries on their own faiths have regularly been a mixture of exhortatory exposition and apologetics. Insight there has, of course, often been, but the work then often becomes less of an objective account and more a source, directed more to the faithful than to the disinterested outside enquirer, and stated more with respect to doctrine, ritual, mystical or meditative experience, counsel or wisdom than with respect to the historical, social, or psychological context and impact of faith.

I take Shimazono's point in distinguishing controversial, competitive, and ecumenistic commentaries on religion (of all of which an abundance exists within Christianity itself) from any type of *Religionswissenschaft*. They represent a different *genre*, and they have a different purpose from scholarly endeavours to comprehend religion as a social phenomenon. Shimazono's advocacy of the use of the study of religion goes further than my own brief. Given its own canons of enquiry, the sociology of religion does not go so far as to prescribe "the best way of living" (p. 88) whether with respect to the adoption of any particular position or to total individualism. My conception of academic enquiry is of study the aim of which is not to proclaim final truth, nor to assume it as its own automatic, unexaminable standard, but one which sets itself the more modest task of seeking to understand the relationship of men to their religions.