

Reflections on the Path to Understanding in Religious Studies

David REID

Professor Yanagawa's retirement from the University of Tokyo Department of Religious Studies marks the end of an era. As one of his former students, and as one deeply conscious of his continuing influence, I should like to take this occasion to reflect on the nature of the religious studies enterprise in Japan during the last quarter-century, the period during which Professor Yanagawa taught at the University of Tokyo. The overall theme of this *Festschrift* of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* is "religion and society in contemporary Japan"—a theme central to Professor Yanagawa's labors. I hope I am not mistaken in assuming that writers who deal with this theme may be allowed a degree of latitude in interpreting it, for I should like to approach my subject under the general heading of "*the study of religion and society in contemporary Japan.*" What I have in mind is not a general survey of the kinds of research that have been carried out during the last twenty-five years, but an analysis of the epistemological premises of the discipline.

Methodological reflection that focuses on the question of epistemology is a somewhat less than popular theme in religious studies publications in Japan. A hasty review of the materials published in *Shūkyō kenkyū* [Journal of Religious Studies] during the past decade shows that of some 1,800 lectures, articles, and research reports, only fifteen were devoted to methodological issues. Moreover, when methodological issues are in focus, they most often take the form of discussions concerning the definition of the concept of religion. Discussions of the epistemological premises of the discipline are extremely rare.

The reason for this hesitance to come to grips with a problem of such fundamental importance is probably related to the notion of "academic territory." Epistemology has traditionally been relegated to the philosophers.

“If there is an epistemological problem, let the philosophers solve it. Meanwhile, let’s get on with our work.” This robust, pragmatic attitude is the one that prevails. And it is manifestly true that one can carry out significant research without waiting around for an epistemological problem to be identified or resolved. To refrain from research until every methodological issue has been satisfactorily put to rest would lead to numbness and paralysis.

At issue here, however, is not the question of epistemology in general, but the question of the epistemological premises of the discipline of religious studies as practiced in Japan today. Just as “war is too important to leave to the generals,” so this question is too important to leave to the philosophers. Like other academic disciplines, religious studies aims at increase of knowledge. It is essential, therefore, that it be as clear as possible about its path to knowledge.

The present essay does not pretend to achieve this clarity. It has the more modest aim of calling attention to the issue and inviting further reflection.

Analysis

To the best of my knowledge there is only one discussion of religious studies methodology that is generally regarded as normative in Japan. This is the discussion presented by Kishimoto Hideo in his frequently reprinted book *Shūkyōgaku* [Religious Studies] (first published in 1961). As Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Tokyo until his death in 1964, Kishimoto was a man of considerable influence, and with particular regard to the matter of religious studies methodology, his influence remains strong.

In this book Kishimoto initiates his discussion of methodology by identifying four types of academic discipline that deal with religion: philosophy of religion, theology, history of religion, and religious studies. In the broad sense of the term, he tells us, “religious studies” includes all four types. Then he begins to narrow down the sense in which the term is to be understood. First he distinguishes two kinds of academic orientation characteristic of these four types: a normative orientation and a descriptive. For objective scholarship the descriptive orientation is deemed normative (no pun intended). Consequently he rules out the two disciplines described as intentionally normative, namely, philosophy of religion and theology. Further distinguishing between historical and systematic studies, he takes the latter as his guide and thus rules out history of religion. This leaves religious studies in the narrow sense of the term. Embracing phenomenology of religion, religious anthropology, religious geography, sociology of

religion, psychology of religion, etc., it is essentially a systematic discipline. As Wakimoto Tsuneya says, "This way of dividing things up may seem a bit schematic, but on the whole, these are the classifications generally acknowledged in the world of [religious studies] scholarship" (1973, p. 269).

This characterization of religious studies is accompanied by a specific ideal: the discipline and those who pursue it are to be "objective." A distinction is drawn between subject and object, and we learn (largely by indirection) that being objective means to restrict oneself to describing facts and analyzing their interconnections. The scholar is to be dispassionate, disinterested. Kishimoto's advice as to how to be objective has never been put in writing so far as I know, but tradition has it that he said, "When you choose a religious phenomenon to study, decide on one that you are not affiliated with." This pragmatic rule has been a helpful guide for many. On the whole, it has probably strengthened the normative view that religious studies is to be objective. Yet it also suggests a problem of considerable importance.

It might seem that Kishimoto's emphasis on objectivity rests on a firm and unshakable dichotomy between the observing subject who can safely be ignored and the observed object that is alone worthy of study. On this view the question of the role of the subject in coming to know the object simply does not arise. In fact the question is largely tabooed because it seems to open the door to uncontrollable subjectivity. But reading between the lines, one can see that the question of the role of the subject had to be dealt with, at least in a minimal way, even from the outset. Otherwise there would have been no necessity for the pragmatic rule that tradition has preserved. This matter will call for further attention shortly.

In essentials, however, it is probably fair to describe Kishimoto's epistemological premises as stemming from the intellectual tradition that traces its origins to Comtean positivism. To be sure, Kishimoto does not speak of a three-stage law of intellectual development, nor does he envision research results presented in the form of mathematical formulas. Consequently he cannot be identified as a doctrinaire positivist. He would not acknowledge the "I am a camera" position propounded by at least one recent advocate of the positivist outlook. Yet for all its "softness," Kishimoto's epistemological position can definitely be identified as basically positivistic. It is a position that would be inconceivable without the influence of Auguste Comte.

The guidelines offered by Kishimoto twenty-five years ago have become, over the years, almost unquestionable principles. The only significant modification that has come to my attention has to do with the role of the subject in the pursuit of knowledge. Particularly for those engaged in

research that involved them with living people whose cooperation demanded a deliberate effort to establish rapport and whose actions and attitudes were clearly influenced to some degree by the presence of the person or persons conducting the research, it became impossible to avoid assigning some role to the subject. For the purpose of role-assignment, a convenient phrase was tucked into the methodological sections of research reports: the phrase "participant-observer." This phrase seemed to offer a happy solution to the problem of how to clarify the role of the subject in relation to the object. In reality, however, it simply offered a way of acknowledging the existence of the problem and seeming to come to grips with it while actually avoiding it.

In recent years there have been a few efforts to reopen questions of methodology, particularly as a result of encounters with philosophically inclined sociologists like Luckmann and socially committed sociologists like Bellah and Berger (regardless of the content of their commitments), but for the most part these efforts have yet to bear fruit.

I think it is correct to say that most people engaged in the study of religion and society in contemporary Japan continue to be oriented by the schematic guidelines laid down by Kishimoto twenty-five years ago. The subject/object dichotomy remains intact, modified only by the compromising phrase "participant-observer."

Assessment

It has long been recognized that significant research can be conducted even on the basis of mistaken theoretical principles. Probably nobody alive today would wish to defend Durkheim's notion of totemism or his view of its role in the evolution of religion. Yet there is probably nobody alive today who would claim that Durkheim's contributions to the study of religion and society are insignificant or unworthy of the attention of present-day scholars.

By the same token, it has to be recognized that significant research can be (and has been) conducted on the basis of dubious epistemological principles. The high quality of Japanese-language publications in religious studies speaks for itself. I often wish that Western scholars could avail themselves of Japanese publications as readily as Japanese scholars avail themselves of Western works. (How fine it would be if we were to construct a computer-accessible data base whereby people could gain access to abstracts and perhaps even to translations of works published in Japanese!)

It must be admitted, however, that a review of Kishimoto's guidelines is long overdue. It is quite surprising, actually, that his schema for classifying and characterizing the types of disciplines for which the study of religious

phenomena is central has not, in Japan, led to rigorous questioning of the basis on which these classifications were made or of the epistemological premises they serve. Yet with the recognition that these premises derive from the positivist tradition, one is also made aware that his tradition is in principle unable to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of the role of the subject in the process of knowledge. In practice we have come to recognize that human perceptions interact with “data” to shape our cognitions—not only in the world at large but also in the world of scholarship, the human sciences and natural sciences alike (see Zukav 1979, Gardner 1979, and Pagels 1982 with reference to the natural sciences). In the world of religious studies, however, we have yet to incorporate this recognition into our frame of reference. The question of how to do so is probably the most critical methodological issue that confronts religious studies in Japan today.

The Way Ahead

It remains to consider what resources offer promise of helpfulness with regard to this methodological issue. Perhaps it would be best to begin by identifying a line of thought that does *not* promise to be helpful. I refer to the question of how to define the concept of religion.

Nobody is more keenly aware of the immense variety of definitions of religion than those engaged in religious studies. When it comes to definitions of religion, we suffer an *embarras de richesses*. Theistic definitions, atheistic definitions, substantive definitions, functional definitions, visible religion, invisible religion, civil religion—one hardly knows which way to turn. Moreover, unless some definition is adopted, one cannot even get started. Since there is no question of attributing exclusive validity to any one definition, we generally have recourse to the necessary expedient of classifying the definition we work with as a “working definition.” This gets us off the hook. Though admittedly arbitrary, this classification has the virtue of sounding modest and allows us to get on with our task. It allows us to avoid getting bogged down inextricably in the definitional problem.

If what is required is a definition of religion that can be applied universally without reference to space or time and that will commend itself persuasively to scholars of every perspective, then the problem of definition is probably insoluble. The best we can hope for is the working definition whereby we stake out in a general way the type of religious phenomenon that we choose to study.

With particular reference to the epistemological issue concerning the interaction of subject and object in the knowledge-process, it seems self-evident that defining and redefining the object, no matter how precisely, cannot lead to a resolution of the matter. What is required is an epistemological perspective that will help us not to dichotomize subject and object but to take into account the role of the cognizing subject and hence of the world view, categories, and values by means of which we perceive.

This is not a plea for the legitimacy of unbridled subjectivity. It is a call for recognition of the fact that the observing subject is not a mere camera but a human being with a world view, categories, and values that shape and inform what he or she "sees." This implies the possibility that people raised in different cultures and employing different categories may see different things—or the same thing in different ways. Where living people are being studied, it implies the possibility that they may "open up" to one person in one way, to another person in another. We need, therefore, an epistemological perspective that will allow us to take such differences into account. The task of developing a meta-language may be beyond us just now, but we can get on with the task of reflection on the role that our world views, categories, and values play in shaping and informing our perspectives. This includes the question of the "malleability" of categories, values, and world views both with regard to comprehending thought-worlds initially alien to us and with regard to communicating what we learn to people of our own or another culture.

One line of thought with resources relevant to this task is the American line that runs through Norman Brown (1966), Robert Bellah (1970), and Paul Rabinow (1977. Also see Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, Tyler 1969, Bateson 1958, 1970, and Berman 1981). Another is the European line that runs through Edmund Husserl (1936), Alfred Schutz (1962, 1967, 1975, 1976, and Natanson 1970), and Thomas Luckmann (1983). Common to both is a denial that scientific knowledge based on a supposed opposition between subject and object is the ultimate form of human knowledge. Both seek to locate the knower in a cultural matrix, a shared world of meaning. Both insist that the path to knowledge they discern is more in accord with reality, hence more scientific, than positivist objectivism. The difference between the two lines is that the American line is primarily associated with literature, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, whereas the European line is more closely associated with philosophy and sociology. It would be quite possible, however, to consider them as a single line of varied resources.

There may be yet other lines of thought in Japan or elsewhere with which I am unacquainted. If so, I trust that somebody will be kind enough to inform me. In any case there is a growing body of thought to which we can

turn. I venture to hope that study-groups will be formed and their deliberations made available for the benefit of all.

Positivistic assumptions have so thoroughly permeated modern education and modern scholars' views of proper scientific method that it is difficult for us to adopt different epistemological assumptions, even when we have learned to become critical of those by which we continue to be guided. We are at home with the subject/object dichotomy and were nursed on the notion that only research which focuses on the object can be "objective." It seems obvious, until reflection teaches us otherwise, that research which includes a conscious effort to identify the role of the cognizing subject is bound to be "subjective." And in fact efforts of this kind are not infrequently vulnerable to this charge—a perhaps inevitable consequence of seeking to refashion the epistemological universe in which we "live and move and have our being." Yet the negative resonances that accompany the word "subjective" must not deter us from recognizing that this once so obvious assessment often reflects an implicit reliance on the positivistic epistemology. If it is important, as I believe it is, to account for the role of the cognizing subject in the process of cognition, it follows that we must make the effort, however few the guidelines, to come to a new understanding of the path to understanding in religious studies.

The positivistic schema, despite its substantial contribution to the development of high-caliber religious studies in Japan, will have to be replaced. Such a transition will doubtless be fraught with uncertainties and tensions, but with increasing awareness of the fundamental importance of the problem, this transition can be avoided only at the cost of imperilling the logical integrity of the discipline.

References

BATESON, Gregory

1958 *Naven: A Survey of the Problems suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View*, 2nd ed. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

1970 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler Publications.

BELLAH, Robert N.

1970 *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. New York: Harper & Row.

BERMAN, Morris

- 1981 *The Reenchantment of the World*. Toronto and New York: Bantam Books edition (1984).

BROWN, Norman O.

- 1966 *Love's Body*. New York: Vintage Books (Alfred A. Knopf and Random House).

GARDNER, Martin

- 1979 *The Ambidextrous Universe: Mirror Asymmetry and Time-Reversed Worlds*, 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books.

HUSSERL, Edmund

- 1936 *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970. English translation: *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, David Carr, transl. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press (1970).

KISHIMOTO Hideo 岸本英夫

- 1961 *Shūkyōgaku* 宗教学. Tokyo: Taimeidō.

LUCKMANN, Thomas

- 1983 *Life-World and Social Realities*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

NATANSON, Maurice, ed.

- 1970 *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

PAGELS, Heinz R.

- 1982 *The Cosmic Code: Quantum Physics as the Language of Nature*. Toronto and New York: Bantam Books edition (1983).

RABINOW, Paul

- 1977 *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

RABINOW, Paul and SULLIVAN, William M., eds.

- 1979 *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

SCHUTZ, Alfred

- 1962 *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*, Maurice Natanson, ed., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

- 1967 *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert, trans. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- 1975 *Collected Papers III: Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*, I. Schutz, ed. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- 1976 *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*, Arvid Brodersen, ed., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

TYLER, Stephen A.

- 1969 *Cognitive Anthropology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

WAKIMOTO Tsuneya 脇本平也

- 1973 *Shūkyōgaku* 宗教学. In Oguchi Iichi 小口偉一 and Hori Ichirō 堀一郎, eds. *Shūkyōgaku jiten* 宗教学辞典. Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai.

ZUKAV, Gary

- 1979 *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*. Great Britain: Fontana Paperbacks edition (1980).