Reexamination of "Religion" in Contemporary Society

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1. The Negative Image of Religion and the Non-obvious Concept

MANY Japanese people have a negative attitude towards religion. The single most significant incident in recent times that has contributed to this perception was surely the sarin gas attack perpetrated by the Aum Shinrikyo in 1995. The attack had a major impact on the Japanese people, converting a previous lack of interest in or awareness of religion to an overwhelmingly negative attitude. It was followed by a succession of other incidents, not least the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, that served to further reinforce the sentiment. In such a climate, an individual admitting to involvement with "religion" was liable to be viewed with suspicion. It should also be remembered that media reporting has had an enormous influence on public awareness and perceptions of religion. Reports of incidents involved with religion generally present religious groups and representatives as dubious, suspicious or otherwise disreputable. For people without a chosen faith or creed, there are very few information sources that present religion in a positive or favorable light. As much as religious scholars may argue the importance of religion, their words are invariably drowned out in a sea of criticism.[1]

This absence of a proper understanding of religion in Japan makes the role of religious scholars even more important. But there is a problem in the current situation with the very concept of religion. Amendments to the Fundamental Law of Education are currently being debated, including a strong push for the introduction of religious education. Opinions on religious studies are being sought as part of the debate, yet the concept of religion itself is far from clear even within the religious sector.

In recent years there has been considerable debate in the humanities and social sciences about whether concepts being generated in various disciplines in the name of modernization can or should be accepted unquestioningly and without proper scrutiny. The non-obvious concept of religion has been subject to a similar level of academic reflection. The

notion of religion as exemplified by Western Christian societies is crumbling, to the point that it is no longer considered an obvious concept. While this unprecedented decline is connected to the traditional idea of religion as something that cannot be fully defined, the situation is more serious in that the term "religion" is no longer seen as valid. In fact, some radical religious scholars have even gone so far as to brand religion a form of ideology.

This sort of scholarly debate is unlikely to appeal to the majority of Japanese people, who tend to have limited interest in religion. Given that religion is a relatively modern concept within the broad sweep of history, any attempt to argue that academics themselves were the primary drivers of religious discourse will simply lead to confusion among those not in the religious sector. At the same time, it is clear that we cannot afford to dismiss the non-obvious shift in religion. This is a pivotal issue for religious scholars and researchers in considering the reappraisal of religion and new perspectives on religion. We need to critically examine how outdated concepts of religion have given rise to distorted perceptions, and explore new approaches for the future.

In light of the ongoing globalization of society, the very act of seeking the rational understanding of others while exploring new meanings for "religion" (at this point in time we are obliged to use this term) in modern society that are abstracted from the conventional notion of religion can of itself yield a range of new possibilities for people in modern society. If we accept that the conventional notion of religion has developed from a Western-centric perspective, then this presents those of us in the non-Western world with an ideal opportunity to reexamine religion from our own perspective. At this symposium, which seeks to explore the modern-day meaning of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the question of how to discuss religion from a position of understanding is very significant. In this paper I will analyze several key arguments on the concept of religion with respect to the non-obvious trend thereof, and ask whether there might be other possibilities lurking within the impasse created by this trend.

2. Models and Frame of Reference for Defining Religion

1) Three Models of Religion

It is clear that religious scholars study religion; but this is not to imply that the definition of religion is itself clear. Although scholars have put forward many different definitions of religion, we have yet to see a sin-

gle unifying definition that is broadly accepted and widely used. We all know that religion today is exceptionally difficult to define. Yet it would be wrong to claim therefore that religious scholars and researchers are unable to make general assumptions about religion. According to Gary Ebersole, the fact that this indefinable phenomenon continues to generate enormous volumes of scholarly research may well be because already have a framework for analyzing the nature of religion. Ebersole argues that the words of the American Supreme Court justice in his opinion statement on a pornography case—"Although pornography is hard to define, I know it when I see it"—applies equally to religious scholars grappling with religious questions.[2] In other words, though we may not be able to offer a definition of religion as such, we still know it when we see it. This in turn means that religious scholars and researchers already know and understand what religion is.

So let us consider now the question: what is a framework of religion? Ebersole proposes three models for the framework of religion as used by academics.

The first framework holds that religion is a form of objective reality. This position is exemplified by the writings of Émile Durkheim, based on social and historical analysis with religion posited as social reality or actual fact. Many academics in this school concur with Durkheim's basic position, namely, that humans are innately religious beings and religion is an immutable aspect of human nature.

The second framework holds that religion is either an essentially subjective mode of existence that is inherently irreducible (and therefore transcendental) or a basic emotional reaction to the wholly other (ganz andere). Thus, religion can be seen in the human body in the clearly different reaction to wholly other and the sacred. This approach, centered on religious experience, is based on the position held by Joachim Wach among others, where non-religious experiences are treated as secondary phenomena, sacred experiences as unique (*sui generis*), and as irreducible to other things. Under this framework, religious experiences transcend time and space and are immutable.

The third framework of religion holds that religion is simply a category created by academics for the purpose of discourse and a product of human scholarly activity.[3] This position, far removed from the other two, was the impetus for critical reappraisal of the concept of religion as noted in the introduction to this paper. If we accept this approach, then religion is no more than an analytical framework posited by researchers for the purpose of pursuing their research. Religion is thus something that has been dreamt up by scholars as a tool for use in extracting com-

parisons and generalizations.

These three approaches naturally have areas of commonality, particularly when it comes to the views of individual researchers. None of the three positions described above can be said to be mutually exclusive in relation to the others. The first and second positions, for example, are predicated on social realism and religious experience respectively but both maintain that humans are inherently religious beings. Meanwhile, some adherents to the first position analyze religion as a social (or sociological) phenomenon while maintaining the social axis. In this case, religion clearly exists as a social phenomenon, even without questioning the sacrality of society from the perspective of social realism.

Scholars use these frameworks or positions as the basis for analyzing whether or not a given phenomenon constitutes religion. This analysis involves a range of different variables pertaining to social phenomena and human experiences of a sacred, including churches, religious groups and organizations, symbols and the transcendental and associated subjects, religious observance and doctrines, and daily actions and non-daily rituals.

The third position will be discussed in detail later in this paper. For the moment, let us take a quick look at the major differences in approaches to religion between the first two positions. This should illuminate the nature of religious studies at present, in turn generating a third position and providing some clues as to the non-obvious transformation of religion.

2)   The Anti-reductionism and Positivism Counterattack

The historian of religion Mircea Eliade, a leading proponent of the second position, argues that religion is inherently unique and cannot be reduced to anything else. He maintains that phenomena are created by measuring scales, and that religion should be viewed in terms of its own scale. Further, reduction of religious phenomena to physiology, psychology, sociology, economics or art makes them no longer unique, irreducible and, ultimately, the sacred. Certainly there are no purely religious phenomena—there is nothing that is only religious. Religion is a human phenomenon, and therefore a social, linguistic and economic phenomenon. Therefore it would be a mistake to reduce it to a form other than religion.[4]

Eliade has been critical of the reductionist viewpoint, which attempts to describe religion in terms of non-religious elements. His arguments are in turn refuted by positivism from the social scientific perspective. Positivists are critical of the renunciation of reductionism as espoused

by Eliade, which they term religionist. They argue that Eliade has con-
fused reduction with simple academic explanation, and further, that his
anti-reductionist stance, formulated from his own religious beliefs, is
itself a form of reductionism imposed upon a realistic appreciation of
religion that can also be called his own religious beliefs. Robert Segal, a
staunch critic of Eliade's anti-reductionism, posed the following ques-
tions. Does there in fact exist some sort of essential basis to religion that
cannot be reduced? If religion is one of the constituent elements of
human existence in social and cultural terms, then how should we
describe, define and explain society, culture and religion? Does religious
study have its own academic methodology that differs from other disci-
plines? And should we insist that scholars themselves be religious?[5]
The above questions attracted almost no response whatsoever from Eli-
ade and the Chicago school of historian of religion, the centre of reli-
gious studies in the United States. It is possible that they simply refused
to acknowledge Segal as a worthy sparring partner. The positivists even
seemed a little sensitive to criticism that the reductionists were unable to
describe the "essential" nature of religion. The debate at that time
reveals the burgeoning success of the anti-reductionists, led by Eliade
and the Chicago school, and evidence of irritation among the positivists
who were being criticized.

The tension between the first and second positions in religious study
continued within the general flow of events in line with the third posi-
tion. In recent years, some commentators have dubbed the Eliade school
of religious researchers "classic," irrespective of their views on it. As we
have already seen, this is not a one-track development but is in fact con-
sistent with a general shift towards modern-style reflection in many non-
religious areas of the humanities and social sciences. In any case, the
second position is acknowledged as an approach towards the fundamen-
tal nature of religion, and it reflects the religious attitude of researchers.
As such, it will eventually be acknowledged that such discourse in reli-
gious studies can be the creator of religion.

3)   Criticism of Discourse on the Concept of Religion

The third position is described as follows in the work *Imagining Reli-
gion* (1982) by Jonathan Smith. "If we have understood the archeologi-
cal and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which
to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them." But western
man, "has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion."
In other words, the speculative conjectures that have been the primary
concern of religious researchers are no more than a secondary act. Smith

argues that, despite the fact that enormous numbers of data, phenomena and human experiences and expressions can be classified as religious under a given set of standards in any given culture, "*there is no data for religion*," which is nothing more than the product of academic research. According to Smith, religion cannot be considered unique and independent apart from academy. Students of religion—particularly historian of religion—"must be relentlessly self-conscious," "this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study."[6]

Smith's view that religion is tantamount to the conjecture of scholars is reflected in the religionist criticism of Russell McCutcheon.[7] From the early 1990s, with the Eliade's studies steadily being consigned to "classic" status, Eliade's discourse began attracting politically inspired criticism. According to McCutcheon, the history-based tools and the tools developed over time by the previous generation of scholars were accepted as transparent and self-evident, and these tools have been used to categories and analyze human behavior, with a theoretical and even political burden.[8] He maintains that religious researchers (including even positivist students of religion) have ascribed a unique ontology to religion, and even goes so far as to suggest that we should not use the word "religion" at all.[9]

3.   Religious Theory in Japan and Recent Studies Findings

Religious scholars in Japan have increasingly come to accept the need for an urgent reexamining of the concept of religion since the late 1990s, in response to developments in Western religious studies. It was at this time that academic conferences on religious studies began featuring panel discussions and symposiums on the question of religion.[10]

A relatively young band of religious scholars in Japan has compiled two research documents based on the outcomes and findings of domestic symposiums and research programs. The first, entitled *Rethinking Religion* (2004), presents a reappraisal of the concept of religion along with a thorough dissection of religious debate in the West (as discussed in this paper) from the theorist's perspective. The other publication, *Iwanami Lecture Series*—Religion (10 volumes) (2003–2004), was released by the leading domestic publisher Iwanami Shoten. Although not all of the ten volumes address the issue of reappraising religion, the general underlying principle of the series states that religion cannot be considered a firm and immovable existence. In this sense, the ten-volume series can be seen as a response by Japanese religious scholars to the non-obvious trend in religion. Taken together, these two research

findings perfectly illustrate the response of religious studies in Japan to ongoing debate in the West, and the current state of religious studies in Japan.

The two publications trace the history of formation of the concept of religion in the West in considerable detail and identify the defining academic characteristics of religious study that is held to be a heaven-sent missive of the modern-day Enlightenment. They analyze the acceptance and formation of the concept of religion against the historical background of religion and religious research in Japan, and consider how religion can be objectified from the perspective of the non-obvious shift in religion.

It is unfortunate that religious studies in Japan seem to have accepted the adopting a unilateral stand in the debate on Western research trends and methodologies. Nevertheless, these two publications on the reappraisal of religion provide a valuable insight into the future direction of religious studies and offer new approaches to religion.

For instance, they look at the period before the new religious orders in Japan (such as Tenrikyo, the example cited in this study) began to assert themselves as religious entities and consider the word "the way" (*Omichi* in Japanese, as used by believers to refer to their religious order), in particular analyzing the differences between the characteristics of the world of faith in practice (spoken of as *Omichi*) and modern religion (represented by the Tenrikyo order).[11] This approach is useful for identifying the similarities and differences between modern religious perceptions in the age of globalization compared with traditional notions of faith in practice.

Another example can be found in Volume Six of the Iwanami lecture series on religion, which discusses research on the question of "bonds" (*kizuna* in Japanese) from a number of different angles. This publication avoids using the word "religion," which is already increasingly inappropriate to describe an obvious fundamental reality, in considering possible approaches to the question. The word "bonds" is used as the basic theme for exploring possibilities in a variety of areas such as rural communities, modern lay Buddhism and emergency relief and assistance activities tied to religious groups. The editors argue that, in the context of the debate on forging new bonds in the modern era, many activities and events that have not traditionally been labeled religious could be reinterpreted to have religious overtones. Thus, it could be argued that gatherings that would normally be considered secular in nature. Similarly, it is worth reconsidering the religious dimension to the family ties that emerge within the modern forms. Meanwhile, the political implica-

tions of the ties that bind people are also discussed based on the findings of religious research.[12]

There is an efficiency to consider religion from the perspective not to assume religion as obvious and substantive. If we accept that we need to release the ties that bind many different modern concepts as obvious, then the considered to be an area that have been categorized as secular has historically been built up in the same way as religion. This area has not been included in the scope of religious studies, but perhaps it should be.

Irrespective of whether we maintain that human existence is religious or social, it is nevertheless true that religious studies fulfill the role of questioning the religious aspects of humankind and society. It is clear that religious studies have not moved away from this basic position. Even though the concept has become non-obvious, this does not mean that the humanistic phenomenon that has been called religion has ceased to exist. Today, while religion is no longer obvious, we are still obliged to approximate phenomena based on the analyses and interpretations of religion to date.

4.   From the Non-obvious towards a New Human Image

Russell McCutcheon argues that the term "religion" may no longer be valid anyway. But without using this word, how are we to describe so-called religious phenomena? It is possible to use non-religious key terms in response to the non-obvious transformation of religion, as we have seen. The validity of this approach has been confirmed. However, underlying this approach is the knowledge base that has been built up by students of religion, and the concrete phenomena that have been clarified under the category of "religion" to date. The debate over religion arose from criticism of the political nature of scholars and their authority. Certainly, the significance of such criticism cannot be denied. But, as is often pointed out, it is clear that modern academia is predicated on concepts such as history and folklore, economics and psychology. In comparison with these academic categories, it does not mean that only the field of religious studies has its own unique issues to grapple with. If religion is unable to sustain itself, then other disciplines will also fall. From a broad perspective, this sort of issue can be said to be an issue of modern academism. While religious studies may be the heaven-sent missive of the Enlightenment, it is also acknowledged as a form of criticism modernity.

In this paper, we have acknowledged the non-obvious transformation

of religion and discussed the potential for and significance of approaching the phenomenon from a different angle. I believe that among instances of actual study, we can find examples where non-obvious approaches to religion can identify aspects that are not revealed through the conventional type exploration of religion.

I am currently conducting a research study on the transformation of meaning at religious holy sites in Okinawa due to tourism development. After Okinawa was handed back to Japan, tourism was seen as the key to economic independence and survival. Sacred sites were seen as tourism resources and used to foster a sense of belonging and cultural identity among the Okinawan people. Shurijo castle, the center of the former Ryukyu dynasty, was restored in 1992 and registered as a World Heritage site in 2000, and fulfils a major role in uplifting awareness of Okinawa. Restoration of physical structures such as Shurijo castle provides a visual manifestation of culture, and requires visualization of religious observance and tradition. In recent years, many different forms of religious observance have been revived, recreated and developed, based around Shurijo castle. In this way, Shurijo castle has assumed its former role as a sacred site of religious significance.

Although the government has taken the initiative in the restoration of cultural heritage, the process itself requires specialist knowledge in a range of fields. Historians in particular often play a very important role in studying historical evidence. It is accepted that intellectuals' persons (i.e., historians) are helping to enhance the ethnic identity of the Okinawan people through active participation in cultural restoration. While such examples are not uncommon, they do suggest that the spiritual motivation for the restoration and revival of former religious observance, physical structures and religious altars is closely related to ethnic pride and the existence of the self. I believe it is possible to discern a religious aspect in the actions of the intellectuals driving cultural restoration. This transcends the revival and restoration of traditional culture and the emergence of new culture in the unique region that is Okinawa, and provides a clue to identifying the religious nature that enables survival in a modern globalized world.

These examples illustrate the political aspect of intellectuals. Academic knowledge is sometimes used as the means of obtaining authority and authenticity for the management and monopolization of sacred sites. Although I do not have the space here to discuss this in detail, in short the hegemony among intellectuals has been made possible by modern circumstances. There are various power struggles and authority clashes in connection with their religious representations, generating a political

aspect to religious representation. The flip side of acknowledging this political aspect is the poetics seeking to restore pride in one's own culture, which underpins their stance in relation to religious representations. A third party might view their actions as political, but they would argue that their involvement in sacred sites and representations is motivated by their own poetics. And I believe that it is possible to discern religion within the poetics.

It is expected that this sort of interpretation will attract criticism for analysis and interpretation based on assumptions regarding the religious nature of the subject. But was it not the non-obvious transformation of the concept of religion that criticized this aspect of intellectuals? When we consider the non-obvious transformation of religion in the context of religious studies with reference to the example of Okinawa, we can identify parallels with the construction of the concept of religion by Eliade and others.[13] Clearly, the search for a new human image is part of the non-obvious transformation of religion and the quest for new meanings and possibilities in religion.

If we accept that the non-obvious transformation of religion is gravitating away from frank criticism of previous academic historical and ideological precepts and towards the search for a new human image, then this leads us to the possibility of the awareness that we are obliged to accept that human existence is essentially religious. No doubt this view will also attract criticism that the search for a new human image is an essentialist attitude. However, this could potentially invert the relationship between the poetics and politics of the views and actions of intellectuals as described above. There is every possibility that attempts by religious scholars to analyze the politics aspect could be interpreted by a third party as poetics. If there is an academic discipline that interprets the politics of the human phenomenon from a standpoint that does not acknowledge the religious nature of humanity whatsoever, then presumably we should be able to discern the poetics behind the discipline. The potential that can be discerned within the non-obvious transformation of the concept of religion is part of the process of viewing both the politics and poetics associated with the analysis and interpretation the human phenomenon in a form that includes religious scholars themselves. At the present point in time, we cannot speculate on the nature of the religion that is found there. But I believe that this process is linked to the quest for the new image of human existence.

Notes

[1] In the overwhelmingly negative slant on religious reporting in the mass media, increasingly the Japanese people have very few opportunities to obtain accurate and reliable information about religion through public education channels. Religion in the public education sector is subject to legislative restrictions, so that school students have no opportunity whatsoever to acquire knowledge about religion. Religious education in the broad sense is permitted, within the context of education on religious knowledge. However, at public education institutions, the Fundamental Law of Education ban on "religious education on specific religions" can potentially apply even to knowledge education, and so the standard response is that it is safer to avoid religious education altogether. Thus, schoolchildren grow into adults without receiving any education on matters of religion. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that today's media reporters have also come through the high school system and have little knowledge of religion.

[2] Gary L. Ebersole, "shukyougaku ni okeru minshu shukyo no aratana ichizuke (New Location of Popular Religion in History of Religion)" in *SEKAI NO MINSHU SHUKYO* (Popular Religions of the World), Michio Araki (ed.), (Japan: Minerva Shobo, 2004), p 163

[3] Gary Ebersole, op.cit. p 164

[4] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Translated by Rosemary Sheed, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 (1958)). The reductionist criticism presented here is echoed in several other publications.

[5] These arguments are neatly summarized in works such as Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan (ed.), *Religion and Reductionism*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

[6] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1982), p. xi.

[7] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1997).

[8] Hidetaka Fukasawa, "The Concept of Religion and Religious Discourse Today" in Yoshio Tsuruoka and Susumu Shimazono (eds.), in *SHUKYO SAIKO* (Rethinking Religion) (Perikansha Publishing Inc.: 2004, pp. 19–23). The translation of the McCutcheon quote used here is taken from Fukasawa's paper.

[9] Fukasawa, op.cit.

[10] There has long been criticism of the academic framework itself in connection with issues arising from sciences adjacent to religion, such as academic hegemony of modern humanities, which originates from the West, and representation of others, an issue which has been identified in cultural anthropology. This provided the impetus for the reappraisal of religion itself in the West described above.

[11] Shinkichi Fukushima, "The World of Religion as Omichi" in Yoshio Tsuruoka and Susumu Shimazono (eds.), *SHUKYO SAIKO* (Rethinking Religion) (Perikansha Publishing Inc.: 2004), pp. 254–282.

[12] In this way, the reappraisal of religion promotes reconsideration of other, associated concepts that have come to light, such as secularism, and the spiritual benefit of this world acquired through observance of Buddhist teachings. These concepts carry a significance that is generated by the value and form of their Western-centric nature and the Christian model of religion, as opposed to their actual etymological meanings. Many new aspects are revealed by revisiting these concepts with a critical eye.

[13] In fact, the work of intellectuals and others engaged in religious studies provides some indication of their positions and religious affiliations.