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On the Complementarity between Phenomenological and Statistical Approaches for Prayer Research with reference to East Asia

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Abstract: Heiler's "prayer" is a classical research example of phenomenological and systematic studies of prayer; however, its tendency toward a Christian- and Western-centric viewpoint has been criticized. More objective and scientific research methods are required for comparative study of prayers including those found in East Asian religions. In this paper, I would like to consider new possibilities and limits that could be generated by combining statistical research methods and conventional phenomenological research.

By utilizing a statistical approach, especially with international comparative researches, the possibility of studying prayer acts, not as acts bound by specific religious traditions, will be made possible. However, problems such as what kind of questions should be set remain. It is difficult to generalize and universalize the language used by various religions. There is an essential problem concerning translation of religious languages in religious studies. One of the tasks religious phenomenology has been to work on the problem of this translation. However, there was a problem in considering the concept presented there, not as an academic analytic concept but as an essential element of religious phenomena. Therefore, keeping in mind that the results of international comparative research are not indicative of some entity, but rather represent the analysis of results of a specific situation, it is necessary for us to situate the results in an individual and concrete situation and rethink them in those contexts. By doing so, we are able to obtain more meaningful results.

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1. Introduction

This paper forms part of two research projects, "Development of pluralism invoking vitalism and common religiosity, integration of theory and empirical analysis based on international data of people's beliefs" (Hoshikawa-KAKEN) and "International commonality of religions, elucidation of religious diversity and impact on society" (Kawabata-KAKEN).

My common task in both research projects is the search for the possibility of collaboration between statistical research and research of religious thought based on pre-existing literature data. Or rather, the

collaboration of a social science, statistical-based approach and a comparative (phenomenological) approach. Thus far, the former has criticized the latter as “essentialist”; and the latter the former as “reductionist.” Furthermore, the latter approach has declined while critique of religious concepts has gained strength. However, on the other hand, given the progress of cognitive scientific research of religions (evolutionary and brain sciences), the essence of religion is being paid attention to, and phenomenological research has been refocused as a result. How can such development of religious theory be combined with our research results (i.e., extraction of common factors)? In exploring these issues, I have participated in this study from the standpoint of the latter (i.e., comparative study of religions), through the creation of a question items list for a questionnaire and subsequent analysis of the results obtained.

2. Research Progress Thus Far: Introduction to the Research

The [aforementioned] studies are multi-year, cross-cultural examinations of religious commonalities. Although tremendous differences exist between East Asian and Western religious cultures, common cross-cultural elements transcend their respective cultural contexts. This study employed three Internet-based religious belief surveys. The first survey, conducted in 2010 in the United States and Japan, consisted of 100 questions. The second survey in 2014 consisted of 186 questions, including some selected from the first survey and was administered in the following eight countries: the United States, Italy, Russia, Turkey, Taiwan, India, Thailand, and Japan, where Protestant, Catholic, Greek Orthodoxy, Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Shinto represent the world’s religions found therein. The third survey, conducted in 2016 in 8 countries, consisted of 90 questions. Survey data analysis found one common dimensional structure in eight countries. The first and second survey results allowed researchers to detect questions highlighting commonalities between the United States and Japan, and within the eight countries. By using a differential item functioning analysis detects common items, it in fact proved to be so sensitive that it missed the most possible, detectable commonalities when using multiple target countries. Constructing a probability model structure enabled all third survey data items to be analyzed simultaneously. Although cultural backgrounds differ, the results show that the eight countries share a single-dimensional structure of various religious belief items. We are already planning the next survey, and expect to have a wider structure including common items of morality and mentality. The wider structure might be also one-dimensional or two-dimensional at most¹.

Significance of the Research and Problems Encountered

As described in the Kawabata’s report above, the background of this study is that there is the need for internationally common standards, scales, and concepts for international comparative research of religions. In that respect, it can be said that our research has achieved “certain” results, and further international comparative research is expected to be developed using the results of the research. However, it is a “certain” outcome and there are limitations.

Some of the issues have been pointed out as problems with the underlying research method within the

¹ Akira Kawabata, ‘Religious commonalities on measurement: Details of three Internet-based surveys’, in *Departmental Bulletin Paper. Bulletin of Graduate School of Human Sciences Osaka University*. vol.44, p.78.

project. More than anything, there is a problem with the terms used in undertaking the research. This has become a most important issue in the choice of terms used in the questionnaire. For example, in the questionnaire, there is this guidance in each language.

Some of the questions contain the words “God(s)” and “Soul”. These are general terms and do not refer to the concepts of “God(s)” and “Soul” taught in any particular religion. When answering, please assume they follow the meaning you think of when you personally use these words.

Some believers will follow this guidance and replace it with what they think with the words “God” and “Soul” mean i.e., they will understand and respond to these as per terms of their particular religious doctrines. Furthermore, it is thought that those who are not conscious of the faith, or religious believers who do not have elements that fall under “God” as a recognizable category, respond without comprehending fully (or, based on their own limited, self-understanding). Of course, although something may become clear by an investigation that includes such ambiguity, it’s hard to argue that the universal recognition of “god” and “soul” is clearly shared internationally within the results of the investigation.

Specific issues concerning religious languages also exist. This is also mentioned above, but there is still a gap between the reality indicated by the specific terms used in each religious tradition (or cult) and the general and academic language expressed by it at the meta level. It is inevitable that there will be a gap between the day-to-day religious practice and religious thinking indicated by such terms, and the question items translated into more generalized language.

However, it is nonetheless pertinent to conduct question surveys while being aware of such limitations. Researcher into religious thought is strongly obsessed with the correctness of concepts, and thus seeks for strict definitions of words. Research of such thought adheres to each of the terms included in the questionnaire items. In other words, we wonder if we can use the term cross-culturally as well as cross-religiously. In the case of statistical surveys, they are stuck with minor differences that are buried in the mass as a kind of “errors.” However, if we become obsessed with the correctness of concepts too strongly, it makes international investigation impossible. As long as a question survey is conducted in reality, and a certain result is thereby produced and a certain evaluation is made on said result, we should work on further investigations while fully recognizing the limit of translatability of language. However, we must endeavor to refine the expression of the item.

Finally, I would like to confirm that this survey principally concerned the aspects of belief. Although it is necessary in the quantitative research of religion, it is also necessary to widely grasp religious behavior *as well as* conscious aspects of it i.e., the nature of belief. However, this research is limited to the former. This is a kind of bias, and it is only one aspect of religion that has been revealed by this survey.

3. Next Issue

Although there are many questions as mentioned above, it is interesting to note that the idea of “religion” has been shown to be somewhat universally international. Therefore, based on the above-mentioned problems, I think that it is possible to refine the question concerning religious practice as the next problem to be tackled. Specifically, it is a collaborative study of methodological research as well as statistical

research on “prayer.”

What we are currently working on is the collaborative work of statistical research and research on the theme of “prayer.” Concerning the topic of prayer, Friedrich Heiler’s *Prayer, A Study In The History And Psychology Of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1932. *Das Gebet. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung*. Reinhardt, München 1919) is a classic of phenomenological study of prayer. However, its Christian- and Western-centric tendencies have been criticized. Therefore, it can be said that systematic and phenomenological religious research has required (and will continue to) more objective and scientific research methods.

However, as mentioned above, there is a problem of concerning translation. For example, the word “inori (祈り)” (“prayer” in Japanese) is also historically loaded. In particular, the word “inori” in Japanese is a superposition of “prayer” as per original Japanese language, and as a translation of “prayer” or “Gebet,” and there is doubt about the appropriateness of it as a religious term. On the other hand, in reality, this term is frequently used in research, and finding alternative words for research is also difficult. On the basis of these problems, we will use the classification items of Reiner Flasche’s theory of prayer which critically inherited Heiler’s theory when forming investigate research questions².

As Flasche noted, the empirical science of religion has explained that prayer, as a verbal and gestural form of communication between religious people and an unavailability in all religions, is one of the religious behaviors. In order not only to be able to empirically divide prayer in its different structures and functions, but also to be able to exclude it from the complex field of other verbal and gestural communication forms of religious behavior, one must not ask what is prayer, not what is the origin, the cause, the evocative element of prayer, but one should use the concept in correspondence to the available and evaluated data of a questionnaire³.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should say that Reiner Flasche, who was a Professor of religious studies at the University of Marburg for many years, was not a positivist sociologist of religions, but he critically inherited the results of religious phenomenologists, for example, Rudolf Otto and Friedrich Heiler et al. In criticizing the research of so-called classical religious phenomenologists, Flasche criticizes their assertions regarding essence in religions, while exploring the possibility of comparative research of religions and claiming the validity of the use of questionnaires at that time. Given this, in order to rule out thoughts of prayer which based only on the prayer of a particular religious tradition, he lists objective indicators. It is near to the so-called “5W1H.”

The outline of the classification items of “prayer” by Flasche is as follows;

- “Who prays?” a1) individual prayer and a2) collective prayer.
- “What is prayed?” b1) free prayer from b2) prayer formulas to stereotypical prayers, b3) prayer poesie b4) confessional prayer, as well as the outcry of the individual or a group of formulated, even fossilized, prayerful understanding can separate incomprehensible prayer forms.
- “How is prayer?” c1) the silent prayer, to which also the internalized prayer belongs, as well as c1b) the ecstatic or c1c) the enthusiastic prayer; on the other hand, however, also the prayer prescribed in its external form and thus c2) ritualized, be it in its manipulative or only motor form.

2 Reiner Flasche, ‘Gebet’, in: *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, Bd. 2, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1990, S. 456-468)

3 a.a.O., S. 461.

- “When is prayer?” d1a) spontaneous, d1b) ritualized or diculticational prayer, whereby not only the question of repeatability, but also the question of the determination of certain times, plays an essential role. Thus we distinguish d2a) culturally repeatable, but temporally unbounded prayers from d2b) prayers associated with a religious cycle, whose repeatability is not least intended to maintain microcosmic or macrocosmic order.
- “Where is prayed?” e1) “the silence Kammer,” e2) the sacred community, e3) the sacred space, e4) the situational space (e.g., Prayers in the foreign, homelessness, in the field before the battle, etc.), in seclusion that may be conditioned by retreats or rites of passage, within “holy” time and “holy” space, etc.
- “Why is prayer?” The broad spectrum of “reasons” for prayer actually opens up. Among other things, f1) distress, f2) fear, f3) feeling of inferiority, f4) gratitude, f5) obligation, f6) adherence to contract, f7) compensation, f8) atonement, penance, f9) Please and many other reasons may be mentioned more. Of course, this area also includes the forms of prayer that are an expression of faith, devotion, worship, as well as those forms that have a manipulative, evocative, and consensual nature.
- g1) “Where is prayer?” and g2) “In what relation does this go to the fact of praying in general?,” in other words, to what extent, in what form, in what frame is it the cause of prayer, is it not the person called but the caller⁴.

We think that the index extracted based on such a specific prayer study can contribute to the creation of appropriate questionnaire items.

Statistical surveys, especially international comparisons, have opened the possibility to study “prayer” without being strongly tied to the values of certain religious traditions. However, the question remains as to *what* kind of questionnaire items to set. It is difficult to generalize the languages used by religions. There is an essential problem in religious studies; translation of religious languages. One of the things that religious phenomenology has dealt with in the past is exactly this translation problem, and although it has achieved certain results, the concepts shown therein are not conceptual *academic analysis*, but rather a concept of *religious essence*. This was a problem of religious phenomenology. Heiler’s prayer study is just that. Therefore, as a result of comparative international research, it is also necessary to recognize that it is abstracted data, not showing any real substance.

There is also a limit. What we need for comparative studies may be academic terms at the meta level, and as far as possible from the individual religious traditions. But as we have already mentioned, many terms of religious studies are neither colorless nor transparent, but they are from the terms of individual religions, and so they cannot be treated like mathematical formulas within the natural sciences.

4. “Norito” as a type of prayer

So far, we have introduced the Heiler-Flache’s prayer theory and its limits. We analyze here “Norito,” the celebratory words in Shinto tradition by the Heiler-Flache’s prayer theory. When considered in

4 a.aO., S. 461-462.

connection with the above-mentioned definition, “Norito” is a prayer used at a festival, i.e., at a ritual place, and belongs not to an individual prayer, but to the prayer of a group. Also, the members of the group say nothing, while the serving priest functions as the bearer of prayer.

The “Engishiki (延喜式),” the old Shinto-text, is the muster of “Norito,” so it is not free prayer as such, but can be classified as a formal prayer. Furthermore, from the results of such analysis, it is possible to compare the characteristics of “Norito” as prayers with prayers found in other religions. But there are also problems with such an analysis here also. We applied the Heiler-Flashe’s prayer theory to the “Norito” and pointed out its features. However, there is a feature that completely falls off from such analysis. That is the nature of “kotodama (言霊),” i.e., “word-spirit.”

As stated above, “Norito” belongs to the formal prayer. Heiler thought that prayer was originally a free form of emotional exclamation, but also thought that the words of the prayer were formalized and fixed by being repeated many times. For Heiler, the formalizing prayer - and it being fixed - was in fact a process of losing the power of prayer as a natural form of genuine, spontaneous prayer, and it was thus a phenomenon that should be regarded as the “fall” of prayer. However, the following explanations have been made regarding the stylistic nature of the epistles.

“These are liturgies or incantations, words written in a particular script that are then read by the head orator at certain festivals for the deities. In general, the classification Norito is widely used to include auspicious words (yogoto) as well as language for ritual purification (harae no kotoba)⁵.” “Norito is a word dedicated to God by Shinshoku (神職), Shinto priests at festivals (祭典). Its content is to honor God and wish the Emperor’s favor. Japan is said to be a country of “kotodama,” the word-spirit. That is to say, there is faith encoded in the words. It is thought that the power of the spirit dwells in the words. Also, it is thought that this spiritual power is exerted when words are taken out from the mouth. So, it is thought that speaking bad words will cause bad things to transpire and speaking blessed words will improve the situation. At the root of Norito is faith in these words. Therefore, they are carefully spoken and dedicated to God, so as not to make mistakes”⁶.

As clearly indicated in the explanation of the Jinjya-honcho, one of the reasons to cast a word without exception is the faith in “kotodama.” However, what is not included in Heiler-Flashe’s prayer theory is this kotodama faith (word-belief).

Certainly, the idea that in words, the contents become real is magical. In other words, if it is not “what to cast,” but the casting itself that is effective, it is not a prayer but rather a spell. But Norito is a word spoken to God. It is communication with the transcendent being. So, Norito has the nature of prayer. Norito is formal not because it has fallen as a prayer. The formality of Norito is necessarily derived from kotodama-thought.

In Heiler and Flashe’s Prayer Theory (typology of prayer), the type “prayer based on kotodama-thought” is not made, and the nature of “kotodama” is not included in the merkmarr of a prayer, because Shinto prayers was not included in the scope of Western prayer research. Of course, even though spells may be treated as non-parity yet similar to prayer, the presence of such spell-like prayers is less well known

5 Motosawa Masafumi, ‘Norito’, *Encyclopedia of Shinto* (on Line), Kokugakuin University, <http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=1246> (2019.07.23)

6 ‘About Norito’ (Norito ni tsuite [祝詞について]), Jinja-honcho (神社本庁) https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/omatsuri/jinja_no_omatsuri/norito (2019.07.23)

in Western Europe.

Heiler collected, classified, typified, and analyzed “prayers” from various epochs from around the world. However, because it was working on the basis of the Christian recognition principle, the idea of prayer based on the kotodama-thought might not have been recognized. Given that it is impossible to collect phenomena that can be regarded as “prayer” in all regions, so it should not therefore be criticized. The important thing is that, under the premise that there cannot be a complete analytical framework, rather it is always to constantly modify the analysis framework while dealing with these cases.

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