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From “Religious” Studies to “Spirituality” Studies —The Common Issues Included in Both

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Abstract: The concept of “spirituality” has replaced the traditional concept of “religion” in recent years. Undoubtedly, the criticism of the concept of religion is behind the spread of the spirituality concept, i.e., the idea of being part of a group which has been considered an element of the religious concept has changed. Although being part of a group is one of the important elements of religion, religiosity that is unbound by such a group is often referred to as spirituality. Certainly, the Eurocentrism of the concept of religion, which was applied to the Christian tradition, has been criticized, and the term spirituality is used to replace it.

Furthermore, the concept of spirituality has been applied to the study of Asian religions and is referred to as Asian spirituality.” However, the term spirituality has the same potential problems that religion had in the past.

Although the term spirituality implies a specific religion, it also promotes essentialist and universalist ideals. Therefore, it contains the same issues as the concept of “religion.” In modern religious studies, there has been much debate over the “essence” of religion, which transcends or is understood by all religions. The Christocentric and Western-centric tendencies of the phenomenological school of religion in defining the essence of religion have been criticized. Hence, the critique of the concept of religion criticized such essentialism. Thus, if the term spirituality is used without a clear awareness of such issues, the same issues as with the term religion will persist.

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1. Introduction

The concept of “spirituality” has replaced the traditional concept of “religion” in recent years. Undoubtedly, the criticism of the concept of religion is behind the spread of the spirituality concept, i.e., the idea of being part of a group, which has been considered an element of the religious concept has changed. An important elements of religion is being part of a group; however, religiosity that is unbound by such a group is often referred to as spirituality. Certainly, the Eurocentrism of the concept of religion, which was applied to the Christian tradition has been criticized and the term *spirituality* is used to replace it.

Furthermore, the concept of spirituality has been applied to the study of Asian religions and is referred to as Asian spirituality.” However, the term *spirituality* has the same potential problems, similar to that of *religion*. Therefore, this paper will analyze the problems included in the study of Asia.

2. Definition of spirituality

First, I would like to list some definitions of spirituality by Japanese researchers.

- A person has the sense (quality) of being connected to something beyond the self that can be felt working within the person and between the person and others.¹
- The focus is primarily on the individual’s experience of some unreachable, unknowable, invisible entity (e.g., nature, the universe, inner God/self-consciousness, a special human being, etc.), and the person’s mystical connection to that entity, resulting in extraordinary experiences and a sense of self-enhancement.²
- The person has the sense of assuming some transcendent being to be distant/abstract/ambiguous, but rather than directly perceiving the presence/manifestation of such a being, one perceives its power to operate remotely in the very human realm.³

As can be seen from those definitions, for religious researchers, spirituality is seen as a “sense” of being “religious.”

3. Views on the currents of spirituality

Here, we would like to present some current views on spirituality.

3.1. Susumu Shimazono

As mentioned in the introduction, behind the popularization of the term *spirituality*, there existed a trend of transformation of religion itself. Susumu Shimazono points out that this is a phenomenon that marks the individualization of religion, away from institutional religion.⁴ It is also a phenomenon that exists as an extension of Thomas Lookman’s “invisible religion” theory.

However, Shimazono argues that even though it appears to be personalized, in fact, a new network is

1 Kashio, Naoki (2004) *The Bonds of the Modern World*, in Ikegami, Oda, Shimazono, Sueki, Seki and Tsuruoka (ed.), *Iwanami Lecture about Religion Vol.6, Bond*, Iwanami-shoten, p.273. 樫尾直樹「現代世界の絆 スピリチュアリティの諸相を描く」池上他編『岩波講座 宗教6 絆 共同性を問い直す』岩波書店

2 Itoh, Masayuki (2003) *Spirituality and Contemporary Society: A Sociological Study of the Religious Consciousness of Contemporary People* Tanko-sha, p.ii. 伊藤雅之『現代社会とスピリチュアリティ—現代人の宗教意識の社会的探究』溪水社

3 Kasai, Kenta (2002) *Spirituality of the Self-help*, in Tanabe and Shimazono (ed.) *Healing in connections*, Senshū-daigaku-shuppanyoku, p.85. 葛西賢太「セルフヘルプのスピリチュアリティ」田邊信太郎・島蘭進編『つながりの中の癒し』専修大学出版局

4 Shimazono, Susumu (2007). *The Rise of Spirituality*, Iwanami-shoten, p.v. 島蘭進『スピリチュアリティの興隆—新霊性文化とその周辺』岩波書店

being formed and that it is not only becoming a private matter but also affecting the public domain.⁵ It is a phenomenon that can be seen in medicine, care/welfare/therapy, education (moral education, holistic education, etc.), environmental issues, etc.

3.2. Masayuki Ito

According to Masayuki Ito, since the late 1960s, the terms *spiritual* and *spirituality* have become widely used among many people in Western countries. Some people are uncomfortable with religion but claim to be interested in spiritual experiences, whereas others value spirituality as the essence of religion, and still others are professionals who are trying to convey something spiritual in education, medicine, and social welfare. The term used differs slightly depending on the person using it and the context in which it is used. However, the words *spiritual* and *spirituality*, which have a different nuance from *religion* and indicate “a connection with something invisible,” have gained wide acceptance in Western societies.⁶

3.3. Brian Zimbauer

According to American religious psychologist Brian Zimbauer and others,⁷ the second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of a secularist mode of thought that sought to understand the world from a scientific and rational perspective. Individualistic values (individualization), which emphasized individual choice and did not favor belonging to a particular group, also developed. As a result, the image of institutional or organized religion as an obstacle to individual holy experience increases, and trust in religion is shaken.

Meanwhile, interest in spirituality as something different from religion has grown, and the term *spirituality* (or its adjective, *spiritual*) has been used frequently since the late 1960s. In response to this change in the public’s social consciousness, *religion* has come to refer to something that is clearly organized in terms of institutions, doctrines, and rituals, whereas *spirituality* describes a sense of personal transcendence or extraordinary and extrasensory perception.

4. Spirituality as an essentialist theory of religion

So far, the discussion has focused on religiosity and religious movements that are not part of traditional religions. However, there is a movement on the part of traditional religions to regard spirituality as the “essence” or “core” of religion. From ancient times to the present day, various religions have existed in various parts of the world, and the claim that they all have a common essence (theory of the essence of religion) has been carried out by the philosophy of religion or the phenomenology of religion in terms of academic history. The study of religion as an empirical religious science has criticized such

5 Shimazono, Susumu (2012) *Spirituality and Contemporary Religion*, Kohbundo. 島蘭進『現代宗教とスピリチュアリティ』弘文堂

6 Ito, Masayuki (2021) *Contemporary Spirituality Culture: From Yoga and Mindfulness to Positive Psychology*. Akashi-shoten. p.27-28. 伊藤雅之『現代スピリチュアリティ文化論：ヨーガ、マインドフルネスからポジティブ心理学まで』明石書店

7 Zinnbauer, Brian J. et al. (1997) Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy. in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 36, No. 4.

essence-seeking activities. However, the philosophy of religion has inherited those studies. Some of the theories of spirituality found today in religious studies are inherited from that theory of the essence of religion.

Takaaki Ito, for example, sees spirituality as linked to the concept of hierophany, as presented by religious phenomenologist Mircea Eliade,⁸ and its theory of spirituality essence is associated easily with transcendentalism. I will discuss that below.

5. Human-oriented or transcendence-oriented

Even if spirituality is not a religion but is “religious,” the elements contained within that concept of religion are not uniform. That is analogous to the fact that the phenomenon of religion contains diverse elements.

For example, there are views that reduce religious phenomena to the psychology of the individual and see them as matters of the heart. There are also views that religion is a social phenomenon, i.e., the existence of religious groups such as religious orders and denominations and their relationship to society. The term *spirituality* emphasized the psychological rather than the social-phenomenological aspect of religion.

In some cases, religion is considered from the perspective of a transcendent being/entity (“God” in Christianity or “Dharma” in Buddhism), whereas in other cases, it is viewed as a human activity. Thus, there seems to be a difference among the commentators regarding that contrast.

First, I would like to consider the case in which spirituality is viewed primarily at the level of human beings. In other words, spirituality is viewed as a phenomenon that is common to all human beings. However, this is not a view that reduces human beings to individual elements but a view that perceives human beings holistically. In other words, it is not only the physical, psychological, and social spheres of the person concerned but also the whole person as an entity that is distinct from those spheres.

In addition, issues related to the existence of the person concerned, such as the meaning of life and death, are sometimes considered as challenges. However, it is not only religions that have confronted those issues. Psychology, philosophy, and literature also share a focus on those issues. I would like to call this kind of spirituality human-oriented spirituality (or human orientation of spirituality).

For example, when we speak of “spiritual pain,” let us assume a situation such as a patient’s loss of the meaning of life. Of course, religious values and ideas can give meaning to life, as to the question of what it means to live with a painful illness. However, that is not a necessary condition. It would be possible to view the issues only as human issues, regardless of whether one is committed to a particular cult or not, regardless of whether one has conscious faith or not.

Second, we can consider those problems in relation to beings (persons) who are beyond human beings. For example, Toshiyuki Kubodera calls it “vertical relationship” in spirituality. Vertical relations refer to the fact that human beings live in relationship with the “divine,” “the mystical,” “transhuman,” and

8 Itoh, Takaaki (2004) Relationship between Spirituality and Religion. in the Research Center for Christianity and Culture ed., *Talking about Spiritual Care — From Clinical Hospice and Vihāra*. Kansei-gakuen-daigaku-shuppankyoku. p.57. 伊藤高章「スピリチュアリティと宗教の関係」関西学院大学キリスト教と文化研究センター編『スピリチュアルケアを語る—ホスピス、ビハーラの臨床から』関西大学出版局

“eternal” as the transcendent other.⁹

That also means that the issue of death must be considered in relation to the “other shore” and the “hereafter,” i.e., life after death or the afterlife, beyond the everyday “present world” in which we humans live. In that case, the problem moves into a realm of “religion,” which modern science has no way of determining. Let us call this transcendence-oriented spirituality (or transcendent orientation of spirituality)¹⁰.

6. Consideration

The former kind of distress and suffering has been questioned in religion in the narrow sense of the term, and even those who are not committed to a particular cult can accept it as a problem relatively easily. But the question arises as to whether it is necessary to dare to capture it by the new concept of spirituality. If we take into account the original characteristic of spirituality, which is “not a religion but religious,” it might be meaningful to focus on its transcendence-oriented aspect and dare to talk about life after death and the afterlife.

However, it also can be said that the very idea of linking religion and transcendence is Christocentric and Western-centric. It is dangerous to claim that transcendentally oriented spirituality is the “true” spirituality because that would lead to the same problem of Christocentrism and Eurocentrism as the old phenomenology of religion.

If spirituality shifts in a transcendent-oriented direction, it might cause inconvenience, especially in the study of Asian religions, and it might be criticized as being Western centered. If spirituality is shifted in a human-oriented direction to avoid such criticism, there is no need to use the term *spirituality* at all. Herein lies the dilemma of the term *spirituality*.

The way to avoid the dilemma is to avoid thinking that spirituality has an essence. Spirituality is merely an indicator for analyzing a concrete phenomenon, not its existence as an entity. We should be aware of that.

7. Conclusion

Although the term *spirituality* implies a specific religion, it also promotes essentialist and universalist ideals. Therefore, it contains the same problems as the concept of “religion.” In modern religious studies, there has been much debate over the “essence” of religion, which transcends or is understood by all religions. The phenomenological school of religion has been criticized for its Christocentric and Western-centric tendencies in defining the essence of religion. Hence, it was the critique of the concept of religion that criticized such essentialism. Consequently, if the term *spirituality* is used without a clear awareness of such issues as problems, the same problems as with the term *religion* will persist.

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9 Kubodera, Toshiyuki (2008) *An Introduction to Spiritual Care Studies* Miwa-shoten. 窪寺俊之『スピリチュアルケア学概説』三輪書店

10 Kubodera calls this “transcendence and ultimateity of spirituality” in his book mentioned above. Kubodera, *ibid*.

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