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The Scientific Nature of the Study of Religion in the West and Asia

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Abstract: In the West during the first half of the 20th century, the study of religion was more religious than scientific. Many religious scholars were involved in religious studies as spiritual people. In Germany, Friedrich Heiler and Rudolf Otto were prime examples. They believed that religion was an innate ability of human beings and attempted to clarify its nature. Their activities were of a practical nature and linked to their religious movements.

After World War II, the “religious” study of religions was criticized, and the scientific nature of religious studies was emphasized. In particular, religious studies after the critical theory of the concept of religion criticized the Western-centeredness of the concept of “religion.” On the other hand, empirical scientific studies of religion flourished during the postwar period. Examples include sociological and cognitive scientific studies of religion. Both the former and the latter insist on the scientific nature of religious research, but there are differences between the two. The former does not directly address the question, “What is religion?” Rather, it views religion as a social phenomenon and clarifies the relationship between various elements of society and religion. Such research is mainly derived from sociology and has a different genealogy from past studies of religion. In contrast, cognitive-scientific religious studies in Europe and the U.S. view religion as an innate ability of human beings and consider it to be a universal phenomenon for humankind. In practice, however, researchers who argue for the necessity of cognitive-scientific religious studies harshly criticize the former religious and practical nature of religious studies.

At issue is the study of religion in Japan and other parts of Asia. Studies in Asia include not only social and natural scientific studies of religion, but also many philosophical and practical studies. To Western scientific religious scholars, such studies appear to be “lagging behind.” While it is reasonable to argue that religious studies must be distinguished from religious activities, a kind of “evolutionary theory” from religious studies to scientific religious studies might not be a universal movement rather than a Western-centric one. Rather, there could be possibilities for the study of religion in Asia that are uniquely Asian.

1. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, the study of religion in the West was more spiritual than scientific.

Numerous religious scholars such as Friedrich Heiler and Rudolf Otto in Germany and Mircea Eliade in the United States engaged in the study of religion as devout individuals (or researchers strongly inclined toward religious pursuits). They believed that religion denoted an innate human capacity and sought to reveal its true nature. Their activities were creative and practical and were also linked to religious movements¹.

Such spiritual studies of religion were criticized after World War II and scholars emphasized the scientific nature of religious studies. In particular, the Western-centric concept of religion was itself criticized in religious studies conducted after the postulation of the critical theory of the concept of religion. Meanwhile, empirical scientific research on religion flourished in the postwar period, for example, studies of religion based on sociological studies and cognitive science. For example, “the East Asian Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (EASSSR)” follows the footsteps of such scientific studies of religion².

Of course, the study of religion is a science and not a religion. However, scholars must also reexamine what it means to be scientific. Both sociological and cognitive science studies of religion assert the scientific nature of their methodologies but evince certain distinctions. Sociological studies of religion do not directly address the definition of religion; rather, they consider religion a social phenomenon and clarify the relationships between varied social and religious elements³. Such research primarily represents aspects of sociology, a discipline that incorporates a genealogy that differs from the study of religion. In contrast, cognitive-scientific religious studies in the West deem religion an innate human capacity and consider it a universal human phenomenon⁴. However, in practice, researchers who argue the need for cognitive-scientific religious studies have harshly criticized former religious studies for their spiritual and practical nature⁵.

I introduce Ambasciano’s argument in this paper, indicating its validity and difficulties. This contention emphasizes the scientific nature of the study of religion from the standpoint of cognitive-scientific religious studies. Leonardo Ambasciano’s book (2019)⁶ traces the history of religious studies from a unique perspective but is not a mere history of theories. It is unique because it discusses the social context of the establishment of the discipline and describes the political circumstances that prevail in academia.

1 e.g., Flasche, Reiner, *Religionsmodelle und Erkenntnisprinzipien der Religionswissenschaft in der Weimarer Zeit*, in: Cancik, Hubert (Hrsg.), *Religions- und Geistesgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*, Patmos, 1982, S.261-276. Friedrich Heiler is a good example of this. Heiler is best known for his study of prayer (*Das Gebet. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung*, 1.Aufl. Rehihardt 1918). He is a Catholic by birth. However, he opposed the papal-centrism and anti-modernism of the Roman Catholic Church and approached the Protestant Church. He took a position that was neither Catholic nor Protestant. During the Weimar Republic Era, he became involved in the Christian ecumenical movement (movement for church unity).

2 This paper was presented at the 5th Annual Meeting of East Asian Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, online 2023.

3 e.g., McGuire, Meredith B., *Religion, the social context*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981.

4 e.g., Pyysiäinen, Ilkka, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion*, Brill, 2001.

5 e.g., Ambasciano, Leonardo, *An unnatural history of religions*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

6 op. cit.

2. Ambasciano's Argument

Ambasciano's *An unnatural history of religions* (2019) chronicles religious studies in the larger context of past events spanning the shift from unscientific to scientific religious studies. The former, unscientific accounts represent "bad religious studies" (or mere histories of religions) as typified by Mircea Eliade's accounts, which have been criticized by many researchers. The latter, scientific studies of religion are labeled "good religious studies."⁷ However, postmodern religious studies have now emerged, and unscientific religious studies are being reproduced; such occurrences are compatible with post-truth social circumstances⁸.

Postmodernist (poststructuralist) religious studies are conducted in the context of nonscientificism and evince the following characteristics.

1. Linguistic turn: language is an imprecise and unreliable instrument for the description of ontological reality
2. Crisis of representation: the author is an entirely not [sic.] consistent nor coherent
3. Decentering of the subject: everything can be analyzed [sic.] as a textual item
4. Critique of essentialism (not to be confused with cognitive essentialism): ultimate values, whatever they might be [sic.], are questionable
5. Cultural turn: a focus on subordinate groups or subaltern social classes and their cultural representations and away from dominant narratives
6. Social constructionism (not to be confused with social constructivism): reality is what culture makes of it⁹

According to Ambasciano, if

Modernism was a product of the Enlightenment, which posited a rigid demarcation between (a) scientific, innovative, and rational approaches to obtain reliable knowledge and (b) non-scientific, traditional, irrational trends that favored the institutional, sociopolitical, and cultural status quo, postmodernism regards the very distinction as ungrounded, that is, lacking sufficient justification¹⁰.

Therefore, Ambasciano states:

The impact of postmodernism on the Humanities and the social sciences has baffled many scholars and, most of all, many readers. Is there really no universal basis at all underlying human behaviors and beliefs? Is science, as a collective activity, inherently flawed? Is there always something left unexplained by science, which may open the door for transcendence and, consequently, for the old phenomenology of religion? Is knowledge exclusively dominated by power relationships? Should we accept that there is no discernible, ontological truth? [.....] they are all best resolved by a

⁷ Ambasciano himself does not use the words "good" and "bad." But it is clear that he is making such a dichotomous assessment.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.143-5, 147-8, 176-8.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.137.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.139.

resounding ‘no’ [sic.]: despite its many [sic.] flaws, science remains the best set of practical tools, accumulated knowledge, problem-solving techniques, social networking, rigorous reviewing practices, and critical thinking available to human beings to understand ourselves, the planet, the universe and everything in between¹¹.

3. Ambasciano’s Assessment

I can agree with Ambasciano’s assertion to some extent. It is certainly true that postmodern religious studies can cause the restorationism of the former classical and theological religious studies.

However, some questions remain. First, I am dubious about the dichotomous understanding of the history of religious studies. It is easy to critique the past using a historical standpoint to apprehend the chronicling of religious studies. However, we must acknowledge the inevitability of time-related limitations. Actions we take today can be criticized by researchers a century later: it is unreasonable to classify erstwhile religious studies as “good” or “bad” based on whether or not they were scientific.

Second, there are specific ways of being scientific. Ambasciano’s book considers the cognitive-scientific and new evolutionary biological methodologies of conducting religious research as scientific. These research approaches can be described as reliant on the natural sciences. However, the author’s argument that only such natural science-based religious investigations are “correct” and all other frameworks are “wrong” is unduly simplistic.

The third difficulty relates to the second problem and concerns the study of religion in Japan and elsewhere in Asia. Postcolonial studies have criticized the Western-centrism of academia, and Ambasciano is right that a major problem would be posed if the criticism of science were to become an all-out denial of scientific truth. However, scientific cognition is not limited to natural scientific thinking. For example, the study of religion in Asia includes social and natural scientific studies of religion as well as immense philosophical and practical inquiries into religion¹².

This situation could appear “retarded” to Western scientific scholars of religion. The argument that religious research must be distinguished from religious activity is understandable. Nevertheless, is the evolutionary theory of the shift from faith-based religious research to scientific religious research a universal movement or merely Western-centric? Can a uniquely Asian study of religion emerge in Asia? The third question has not yet been answered. I would like to consider this issue further.

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¹¹ *ibid.*, p.144

¹² For example, the philosophy of religion in the field of religious studies has been flourishing at Kyoto University. Kyoto University has turned out many philosophers of religion, such as Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani and Shizuteru Ueda. They were practitioners of Zen Buddhism as well as religious researchers.

1918.

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