

From a Science of "Behavior" to a Science of "Understanding"

YANAGAWA Keiichi

The special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* on the sociology of religion of Bryan Wilson (Vol. 9, No. 1) was an excellent piece of work. There are indeed few open discussions like this one in the Japanese world of religious studies. In the field of methodology, in particular, everyone stays in his own little cave and there is little or no exchange of ideas.

I do not feel myself qualified to act as a referee in this discussion. Thirty years have passed since I have written anything really academic on methodology, and though my views on the matter have changed since then, I have published them only in the form of "random notes." I once tried to put my thoughts on the problem of "the sacred and profane" into shape, but this attempt ended in failure. I have described this process in the brief "Foreword" to the fifth volume in the series *Essays in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Yanagawa 1978b), entitled "Beyond the Sacred and the Profane."

Since that failure, however, I have felt rather afraid of touching on the problem of methodology. This might be a fear of having to expose myself. The present essay, then, is nothing more than a simple description of some of my impressions, somewhat along the lines of Morioka, who in the special issue on Wilson proposed "to take as the basis for my discussion the experience and knowledge that I have personally accumulated in my thirty-odd years of research activities" (Morioka 1982, p. 41).

Araki Michio is very emphatic in his "Toward an Integrated

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Understanding of Religion and Society” in calling Wilson’s position one of “old-fashioned functionalism” (1982, p. 68). I must admit that my own position was also a functionalist one. My “initiation” paper in the world of religious studies bore the title “Functionalist Theory in the Sociology of Religion.” Since the starting point of what I wrote there, however infantile it might have been, was Durkheim, I took a clue from his functionalist theory of “religion as integrating society,” which constitutes one aspect of his sociology of religion. I was also much indebted to the influence and way of thought of my teacher, Kishimoto Hideo.

Kishimoto Hideo’s academic work aimed toward a study of religion that would be a science of “behavior.” Kishimoto had visited the United States for four years from 1931, but because of the war was forced to wait until 1950 for a second visit. This second stay in the United States was a brief one, of only three months, but during that time he was able to call on many leading scholars, and he traveled all over the country in order to satisfy his academic hunger. Kishimoto described the results of this trip in an essay, “Impressions of American Religious Study”; the fact that this essay came out as a mimeographed pamphlet reflects the publishing situation at the time. (The essay was later included in Kishimoto 1975.)

What impressed Kishimoto most of all at that time was that there were two different schools of thought in American studies of religion. One he called the traditional school and the other, in his words, was the new study of religion budding from the field of the social sciences (Kishimoto 1975, p. 272).

Kishimoto mentioned theology, philosophy of religion, and the history of religion as being branches of the traditional school of religion. While he found the achievements of the scholars in this school excellent, he added that he had met with almost no scholars who were studying religious phenomena from a scientific viewpoint and who were anxious to open new paths. “I felt an atmosphere,” he wrote, “which was not greatly different from the one that had reigned when I was studying religion in America about twenty

years ago" (p. 284).

Kishimoto's deepest sympathies lay with the second school of religious studies: the rapid development of cultural anthropology, social psychology, psychology of the personality, and psychoanalysis. (Interestingly enough, he does not mention sociology proper in this report.) Although the study of religion was still then in its infancy in these disciplines, Kishimoto was much impressed by the development of studies of culture and personality as a basis for the study of religion, and by the fact that these disciplines had a common perspective in their analysis of human "behavior." He found Ralph Linton's "The Cultural Background of Personality" (1945), in particular, to offer a theoretical basis for a "science of behavior," and expected that the study of religion would also become a part of this science.

"In my heart," he wrote, "I struggled with a fundamental academic problem that I wanted above all to have cleared up then. I carried this problem in my heart when I crossed the Pacific Ocean. It was related to the basic direction of the methodology of religious studies" (p. 271). It was this purpose that resulted in Kishimoto's visit to the United States causing him to opt for a study of religion that would be in line with the social sciences and not the traditional school, and this choice has certainly exerted considerable influence on the study of religion in postwar Japan.

Contemporary students of religion might find it difficult to understand why Kishimoto dwells at such length in his *Shūkyōgaku* ("The study of religion," 1961) on the explication of matters such as needs, acts, behavior and values. His was also a period when scholars of religion found it necessary to at least glance at, if not read carefully, difficult abstract theories such as those expressed by Talcott Parsons and others in *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951). In order to establish an objective, scientific and empirical study of religion one had to determine how religious actions or religious behavior—Kishimoto did not distinguish between actions and behavior in his work—differed from non-religious behavior, and to develop themes such as the motives, structure and classifica-

tion of religious behavior.

FIVE scholars wrote comments on Wilson's paper. In addition to Morioka Kiyomi, a sociologist who stated that he found himself "in practically complete agreement with the points Bryan Wilson makes" (1982, p. 41), there are four commentators who can be readily classified as scholars in the field of *shūkyōgaku* (*Religionswissenschaft*).

Among these, Akaike agrees generally with Wilson's ideas but seems to have a few questions, be they about the whole or some of its particular points. Wilson takes the viewpoint that religious behavior is constituted by the religious phenomena observed by researchers, and explains the attitudes and operational methods that will make a correct understanding of this data possible. I believe that Kishimoto, like Morioka, would find no statements in Wilson with which he would disagree or entertain doubts. If this is so, however, and if we then take into account the fact that the objections to Wilson have come from scholars of *Religionswissenschaft*, it follows that "something must have happened in the scientific study of religion." The question, then, is what is this "something?"

It has often been pointed out that objectivity and scientific and empirical orientation, which were once characteristics of *Religionswissenschaft*, have as such currently come to be mistrusted by that discipline. A trace of this can be seen, for example, in the expression: "What is being questioned in the scientific study of religion." The anti-modern, anti-scientific trend that can be found in certain circles in recent years has certainly exerted a great influence on such mistrust. There is, however, no really devastating tone of argument to be found among Wilson's commentators. Even Araki, who has made the most radical critique, only calls into question what he terms the "poverty" of "objectivity and empiricism" in Wilson's essay.

I would like to deal with the question of "what has happened in the scientific study of religion" by focusing on two problems. One is the problem of "understanding" religion; the other is that of the

Western orientation of the study of religion, or more specifically in terms of the present discussion, of the sociology of religion.

The first volume of the series *Essays on the Scientific Study of Religion* (Tamaru 1977) takes up the methodology of religious studies. The fact, though, that the title of this volume is "Ways to an Understanding of Religion," has a very symbolic meaning. The essays included in this volume have been written from different perspectives and consequently offer us a good view of the current state of the "multi-dimensional study of religion." Insofar as they stress "understanding" rather than "analysis" or "study method," they are indeed representative of the present time. If we take the word "understanding" in its ordinary use without trying to define it strictly, its implications are not a cool observation from the outside, but rather a posture of deep consideration and even sympathy with the contents of the religious phenomena under study. One of the characteristics of "sympathetic detachment," which was a central theme in the discussion, is that even Wilson emphasizes the idea of "understanding with some feeling involved." This is different from sociology proper, which insists on looking at social phenomena as "things."

THE first time I met Wilson was in 1972, at a symposium on "New Religious Movements," in Hawaii. The results of that research team, led by Glock and Bellah, were later published in *The New Religious Consciousness* (1976), but I remember that at the time Wilson was strongly critical of the "sympathetic" research method of the American scholars.

An analysis of "sympathetic detachment" will reveal that it is certainly a term containing a contradiction, and it is precisely for this reason that Swyngedouw refers to the incident of the People's Temple and asks whether one does not have to make a choice in such cases between moral obligations and value neutrality. For the same reason, Araki asks Wilson, "Have you ever changed, or been changed, through your dealings with these various religious phenomena?" The context is rather different, but I once stated,

in a colloquium on "The Future of Religion and *Religionswissenschaft*," participated in by Ikado Fujio, Gotō Ryūichi and myself, that "we have to start with the feeling that we can learn something from our object of study" (see Yanagawa 1978a, p. 341); this statement, I think, refers to an attitude rather than to a method.

Ikado asserted in that colloquium that his own standpoint was to maintain the objectivity of the social sciences through the principle of the behavioral sciences, and criticised, while at the same time showing some understanding of, my study of religion as being of an interpretative nature. I realize now, on further reflection, that I actually did not want to establish a study of religion based on interpretative or hermeneutical methods. Indeed, I do not think that the calling into question of our understanding or interpretation of religion comes about because the study of religion as a "science of behavior," in Kishimoto's terms, has been overcome and a different methodology has been born. It seems to me to be rather because the research interests and methods of the study of religion have changed. And this fact further seems to me to be why the various scholars of religion do not present a completely united front in their discussion with Wilson.

It is true that, as Araki points out, it is impossible to render in the language of the traditional social sciences "such religious phenomena as myths, symbols, rituals and the like—phenomena that defy comprehension in ordinary terms and that have many opaque and ambiguous aspects" (p. 70). But the various religious phenomena mentioned here by Araki are themselves relatively new objects of scientific research, having come to be studied only since the increase in our interest in symbols and symbolism.

Although there exist a few pioneer achievements, the study of myth and ritual—and this is true in the field of *Religionswissenschaft* as well—has largely been confined to a treatment of their historical origin and diffusion; to comparisons and classifications according to the various religions; and, in the sociology of religion, to investigations of the mutual relationships between social structure and ritual. The introduction to the study of religion on a large scale of the results

of semiotics and depth-psychology is itself, moreover, not something with a particularly long history. For *Religionswissenschaft* to become a unique field of study it was necessary for it to enter the very contents of religion, and not the related fields of religion and society, or religion and personality. It had first, therefore, to be concerned with an elucidation of the meaning of symbols (and by this I mean myth, ritual, and icons, as well as religious thought) to the people who have used them, rather than with the observation or analysis of religious behavior. It is difficult to argue generally about whether understanding and sympathy are necessary. Analysis will become impossible in the study of two opposing religious sects if one feels sympathetic understanding toward one of them. On the other hand, it is impossible to interpret a *mandala* without knowing what it meant to the specialist who made it, even though one can to a certain extent disregard the specialist's motivations for having made it and the social relationships involved in its construction.

Akaike develops, in a positive sense, the critique that Wilson's assertions might ultimately be based on ethnocentrism wrapped in a cloak of science when he refers to Japanese religious phenomena and asks for an increased "internationalization" of the Japanese study of religion; Shimazono, though, finds the "establishment of the factors that led to the idea that religion and science are in conflict and tension" to be a Western way of seeing the world, and offers as examples of this traditional Japanese religions. This is similar to something I myself once said in an essay written jointly with Abe Yoshiya (Yanagawa and Abe 1978), and is a topic that Wilson himself might well take up.

Araki speaks about the "particular cultural and historical meaning of Wilson's science." If the term "particular" is taken to mean "a bias among one segment of modern Western intellectuals" (and these are *not* Araki's words), this certainly becomes a fundamental critique of sociology, or at least of one particular part of sociology. Similar theoretical problems were raised in criticisms of sociology made at one time by socialism (currently sociology is also being

practiced in socialist states) and the “radical sociology” of the late sixties. I would like to note only two points in this regard, with the hope that they will lead to further fruitful discussion.

One point is that “Western” sociology of religion, as exemplified by Weber and Durkheim, has in certain regards been influenced by what I would call European self-understanding. This influence can be seen in Weber’s tracing of the history of thought from Judaism to the religious reformations of modern times as well as in Durkheim’s study of primitive religion, which began from a strong sense of crisis in the sustenance of modern European morality. If Wilson’s sociology of religion is a part of this tradition and cannot be called a simple “religious decline thesis,” then we must give a new meaning to what we term the modern Western perspective.

The second point concerns the presupposition that “human beings are fundamentally religious.” Where can we obtain the evidence that this is a universal truth and not an idea based on ethnocentrism, even if we grant that it is not based on a modern Western perspective? Moreover, the assertion that social facts are religious seems to be indeed a fresh idea (and one that would lead to what Swyngedouw calls a *Religionswissenschaft*-like sociology of religion), but what is needed to make it a truly concrete science? These questions I would put to Araki.

I HAVE written this poorly organized essay under a fresh impression that I started from a science of behavior and was vaguely able to extract myself from this stance. In connection with theories of action or behavior, which constitute the basis of the science of behavior, there exists a phenomenological sociology (of religion) that begins with Schutz and has attempted to overcome in a critical way the social science of Parsons and others that was dominant in America when Kishimoto visited there. But I will leave a treatment of this issue to Sonoda.

While I myself belong to the field of *Religionswissenschaft*, and consequently feel a certain sympathy for the ideas of Wilson’s commentators, and especially for the sharp and bold criticisms of Araki,

I have also come to the opinion that "understanding" is important to the standpoint of sociology as well as other fields. There was a time that *Religionswissenschaft*, which then fell under the name "Comparative Religion," was not much better than a dull description of various religions. We in the field of *Religionswissenschaft* must, it seems to me, acknowledge the fact that a shift has occurred to a scientific study of symbols.

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