CHAPTER 6

The Process of Development of Religious Studies:
From History of Theory to History of Reflective Discourse

Japan’s field of religious studies, like most other fields of the humanities and social sciences, has not been very eager to scrutinize its own history. One of the reasons for this was that although the purpose of religious studies is to grasp and understand religious phenomena as the object of study, there seemed to be little interest in making space for self-referential discourse that could establish self-reflective criteria for the manner of that recognition. It was not until the 1990s—with the introduction of Michel Foucault’s discourse studies and focus on politicization of scholarship in cultural studies—that the notion of becoming self-conscious about the frame of reference of one’s own discipline has begun to take hold in Japan.

It should be mentioned, however, that Japanese historiography has been an exception in this regard. Summations reflecting on past activities in that field have been published at various turning points, such as those by Tōyama Shigeki in his Sengo no rekishigaku to rekishi ishiki (Postwar Historiography and Historical Consciousness; 1968) and Carol Gluck in her article in “Sengo shigaku no metahisutorii” (A Metahistory of Postwar Historiography; 1995). The deep involvement of the historical field in both the prewar emperor system and postwar nationalism as well as its considerable influence in society meant that scholars had to be particularly rigorous regarding discourse. Moreover, defeat in the war led to the switch in the mainstream framing of historiography from prewar imperialism and the emperor system to Marxism, facilitating a significant level of self-reflection, with the new generation critiquing the old generation, and the newer scholars being conscious of not having been active participants in wartime historiography.

Religious studies, on the other hand, had in the prewar period been engaged in narrower matters: criticizing the State Shintō system as violating freedom of religion and defending religion (that which is beyond the rational) and in the postwar period opposing the secularization implemented throughout society. In other words, the operations of critical discourse in religious studies were mainly directed against only a few relatively restricted problems in Japanese society. The field was not put in a position of having to examine the broader social responsibility of its own discourse. (The Kyoto School of philosophy,
through its formulations of a Japan-centered philosophy of world history, and anthropologists of religion, with their colonialist views, were also not innocent of links with imperial system fascism.) In addition, compared with Japanese historiography, there was no marked generational replacement of scholars in the field of religion of the kind that might have encouraged straightforward critical engagement with the scholarship of the older generation. In the end, since no positive opportunity presented itself to scrutinize the history of the discipline, the political position of religious studies in the prewar and wartime context remained ambiguous and undefined.

The Study of the History of Religious Studies in Japan

Research into the history of Western religious studies began long ago with Gustav Mensching in *Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft* (History of Religious Studies; 1948). Recent publications include Eric Sharpe’s *Comparative Religion: A History* (1975 and 1986), Hans G. Kippenberg’s *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (2002), Peter Pels and Arie Molendijk eds., *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion* (1998), and Arie Molendijk’s *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (2005). Although the religious studies activity at every Western university is not described in detail, these works examine each country’s distinctive qualities and comprehensively discuss their achievements.

Some efforts have been made to describe and analyze the history of Japanese religious studies, although the number is not large. These include the article that appeared relatively soon after the war by Oguchi I’ichi, “Shūkyōgaku gojūnen no ayumi: Tōkyō Daigaku shūkyōgaku kōza sösetsu gojūnen o kinen shite” (Fifty Years of Religious Studies: Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Establishment of University of Tokyo’s Chair of Religion, 1956), as well as writings such as Gotō Kōichirō and Tamaru Noriyoshi’s “Nihon Shūkyō Gakkai gojūnen no ayumi” (Fifty Years of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies),¹ or Takenaka Shinjō’s “Nihon shūkyōgaku no kiseki” (On the History of Religious Studies in Japan).² These studies pivot on the University of Tokyo’s Department of Religious Studies, but they also provide an overall view of the activities of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, which included scholars from other universities as well.

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¹ Gotō and Tamaru 1980.
² Takenaka 1984.