This discussion draws attention to religion as a Western concept turned
global, and to the ways this concept is investigated and produced by
the academic discipline of religious studies in both Japan and the West.
Originating in the West, ‘religion’ as a field of study was early on employed
by and imposed upon societies worldwide. Only recently, however, have
scholars become aware of the profound effects of this transplantation,
raising questions of analytic comparability as well as cultural and aca-
demic identity. By broadening the scope of this investigation to postcolo-
nial contexts and those who do and do not practice a religious discourse
outside Europe and North-America, we can better our understanding of
non-Western concepts of religion and modernity. I will thus first introduce
briefly recent scholarship on religion in non-Western societies, giving my
impression of a set of intellectual and analytical tools that are needed in
the study of religion. This is followed by an observation of Japanese reli-
gious studies and problems concerning the concept of religion that appear
specific to Japan.

Considerations in Western religious studies concerning both the con-
cept of religion as well as the formation of religious studies paved the
way for self-criticism about the epistemological violence (bōryoku 暴力)
of imposing a Western concept on non-Western societies. Pioneering
achievements in this field are attributed to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, author
of *Comparative Religion: A History* (1986 [1975]). Smith points out that the
names Hinduism and Islam, that is to say the definitions of the objects of
perception themselves, are manufactured by Westerners. He also notes
that these definitions do not necessarily coincide with the self-awareness
of the persons involved (Smith 1991 [1963]). Sharpe, on the other hand,
demonstrates that early religious studies were established hand in hand
with the expansion of colonies in the course of Western imperialism.
Religious studies inserted religious phenomena of other regions into the progress-ladder of evolution theory which put Christianity on top (Sharpe 1986 [1975]).

What is being problematized here is the forcible definition of the object of perception being determined unilaterally by the perceiver. The Western world is the superior perceiving subject, while non-Western societies, as the objects of perception, are merely being defined. As is commonly known, it was Edward Said with *Orientalism*, published in 1978, who examined with a critical eye these unilateral perception-relations. ‘Orientalism’ refers to the process of Western societies projecting an image on others that satisfies and supplements Western societies themselves. Said mentions that the conception of the ‘orient’ was imposed from the outside by the Western media, literature, and states, but it was also aided by the academic discipline called ‘oriental studies’.

Moreover, regarding the problem of orientalism, it would not be sufficient to one-sidedly accuse the West of forcing these definitions. Non-Western societies were also motivated to internalize this view and to identify themselves with the Western subject. This self-identification with Western society is called ‘occidentalism’ and is present among indigenous elites who stand to gain from association with Western political or economic interests (see Carrier 1995 and Chen 1995). By taking the dynamics of orientalism and occidentalism into religious studies, the formation of conceptions of religion and religious studies are reconsidered as issues of cultural identity inclusive of political contexts.

The relevance and applicability of Western conceptions of religion for non-Western societies has been discussed in great detail since the 1990s. In the introduction to *Asian Visions of Authority* (1994) for example, editor Charles Keyes and the other authors point out that a Western concept of religion corresponding to Protestantism did not exist originally in East and South-East Asia. The concept of religion spread in the process of the modernization of these regions as something official while at the same time the traditional indigenous and local religions were looked down on as either pagan or non-religious.

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1 Mention of this inadequate application of religion was already made by the South-Korean scholar Sung-hae Kim in the panel entitled “Retrospect and Prospect: The History of Religions” (Bianchi 1994). Volumes collecting work of this kind that should be mentioned are Keyes, Kendall, and Hardacre 1994; as well as Chidester 1996; King 1999; van der Veer and Lehmann 1999.