
The preface of The Death of the Concept of Religion and of Religious Studies titled “A Leap in Religious Imagination” begins with the line, “the study of religion entered a new phase thanks to the ‘discourse on the concept of religion’ both within and outside of Japan” (p. i). This sentence summarizes Isomae’s main point that, since the 1990s, religious studies has made it abundantly clear that the concept of religion originated from specific historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, religious studies, based on the assumption of a universal concept of religion, had to undergo fundamental changes. Recent studies also contend that the very concept of “religion” originated from Western Protestantism, and this idea is foreign to non-Western societies or even Medieval Catholic societies in Europe. Isomae’s main concern, then, is the direction he believes this new phase in the study of religion should take.

The Death of the Concept of Religion and of Religious Studies is a sequel to Isomae’s previous book Kindai Nihon no shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu: Shūkyō, kokka, Shintō 近代日本の宗教言説とその系譜―宗教・国家・神道 (The Conceptual Formation of the Category Religion in Modern Japan: Religion, State, Shintō) published in 2003. Isomae’s new book differs from his previous one in the following three aspects. First, while Isomae’s 2003 study focuses on the history of the Research Institute of Religion at the Imperial University of Tokyo during the Meiji period, the current book covers a wider scholarly area (modern Japanese religious studies, Japanese religious history, and the history of Japanese Buddhist studies), and a greater historical span (Meiji period to contemporary times). Second, while the 2003 book emphasizes the transplantation and influence of the Protestant concept of religion into and on Japan, the current book emphasizes the ways in which non-Western religions can be reformulated into new religious and non-religious subjects overcoming the epistemological and practical influence of Western trains of thought. Third, while the scope of the 2003 book limits itself to a single nation-state, dealing only with Japan’s entrenched concept of religion in relation to the West, the current book highlights the importance of a broader perspective, asking, “How did the
Japanese concept of religion penetrate East Asia?” (pp. vii, 240). He points out that the intellectual reception of the manner in which the Japanese concept of religion spread into other Asian countries is typical of Japan’s perception of itself as possessing a double role. This is reflected in its image of itself as a (Westernized) Asian country as well as an agent of the West.

The Death of the Concept of Religion and of Religious Studies is composed of ten chapters in three parts as well as an addendum entitled “Colonial Korea and the Concept of Religion.” In the first part where the author presents his basic viewpoints, he also provides a critical review of the concept of religion and suggests an alternative direction. Chapter 3 in Part I bears the title of the entire book, and serves as the book’s center. According to the author’s postscript, he conceived this title under the influence of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s Death of a Discipline (2003). Spivak declares the bankruptcy of Eurocentric comparative literature and presents a vision based on new imaginative ideas about the Other and our common planetarity. Similarly, Isomae argues for abolishing the existing concept of religious studies and suggests new forms of research on religion. However, Isomae is fully aware that this is not an easy task. Thus, he unfolds a series of rather complicated and interesting arguments. Above all, he is wary of the trap of the West/non-West binary oppositional framework. He argues that we cannot overcome the existing Eurocentric concept of religion by replacing it with a non-Western nationalistic one. The concept of religion, after all, was born in a Western historical context and has sustained the current Eurocentric framework. To Isomae, if one chooses one pole out of two oppositional ones, then he or she effectively accepts the framework of a binary opposition. As a solution to this, Isomae proposes the strategy of an “in-between-ness” (p. 12) that destroys the entire conceptual system altogether. Following along the same vein, Isomae also argues to dissolve the opposition between scholars and non-scholars of religion and between believers and non-believers. He argues for transdisciplinary studies that cross boundaries rather than interdisciplinary studies that maintain boundaries, and criticizes multiculturalism based on fixed cultural boundaries, as Isomae prefers to shake up completely entire existing frameworks. A “leap in imagination” is possible only when the existing framework is shaken to its core, revealing a gap in which limits in the existing classification system are exposed and new language, new practices, and an entirely new subject can be created (pp. 274-276).