

Re-examination of the Empirical Category of Science of Religion

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1. Introduction

A recent incident has made religious scholars raise embarrassing questions: What should we say of OM Shinlikyo, especially its distinctive intention and concrete actions to kill unidentified public indiscriminately? Which theory can we rely on, among those of the major stream of science of religion, for our judgment on such an urgent and real issue? To our best knowledge, it is almost impossible to find any particular theory or academic achievements that can be applied to our judgment on such a gloomy crime committed in the name of religion. Some would argue that academism is supposed to be value free and beyond such a practical application. However,

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it is also true that a sound system of knowledge is supposed to furnish certain theoretical devices by which sound judgments can be made on such undeniably destructive events.

If the science of religion avoids any theoretical concern on such a problem, it means: that it tends to beautify whatever happens in the name of religion; or that it tends to ignore ugly aspects of religion; or, more honestly, it is not yet prepared for handling such practical issues. In any case, it implies that the academic concern of the science of religion cannot but fail to keep intellectual balance seeing facts as they are.

This study intends to review some methodological problems sustained by the main stream of the science of religion. Eric Sharpe has rightly pointed out that the main stream of our discipline has been grounded in Max Müllerian dictum, "He who knows one, knows none." This dictum tells that comparative study is essential for the science of religion and that a comparative study should eventually deal with both peculiarity and universality of religions under consideration. In this regard, we may say that seeing both the peculiarity and the universality of the religion or religions is the major methodological issue of the main stream science of religion.

Comparative methodology made a new modern scientific discipline of religious studies launched. During the last one century, the discipline developed a variety of methodologies within the main stream. However, they all agree on one point: that the science of religion as an independent modern academic discipline is not theological or normative, but empirical. Therefore, the term "empirical" in the science of religion primarily means "non-theological" or "non-dogmatic." This empiricism has been the common ground of various methodological stands developed in science of religion. However, it has many faces and is understood in many different ways, generating much confusion and many mistakes in contemporary methodologies of the discipline. We are facing serious dilemmas and uncertainty regarding the identity of science of religion as an academic discipline with universally applicable methodologies.

A primary methodological dilemma is generated from the analytical perspective taking a religion or religious phenomenon as an assembly of analyzable parts or elements. From this perspective, the diversity of the parts is seen, but not the way the parts are interrelated. This shortcoming stems from the Western intellectual tradition, which tends to fail to grasp religion as an organic whole.

In this article, more specific reasons why the contemporary theories of religious studies are unable to see religion as an organic whole will be reviewed.

Science of religion was born and raised in the West, and its theories have been constructed within the contexts of the Western intellectual heritages. The Western intellectual background of science of religion gave it both strong and weak points. In what follows, the methodological problems of science of religion will be discussed in terms of empiricism, reductionism and history.

2. Empiricism and A Priori

Religion is the most complex phenomenon of human culture, complex enough to reflect all the dimensions of total human life. Empiricism seeks to attain the knowledge or understanding of the complex phenomena of religion in terms of certain indubitable elements. The empiricist spirit has adopted comparative methodology as its basic working system from the very beginning of the science of religion. Empiricism and comparative methodology indeed have been the two sides of a coin in the science of religion.

Adopting comparative methodology, the founders of science of religion made it clear that it was an empirical academic discipline. Since then, empiricism indeed has been the landmark by which science of religion has maintained its autonomy and independence from theology, a normative

discipline. Early founders and next generation phenomenologists of religion had varied understanding of what empiricism was, however, they all agreed on one point: they intended to keep their inference in the name of empiricism, that is, they sought the identity of their discipline or, in other words, its difference from theology and dogmatism, in its empiricism. In this regards, the empiricism in science of religion meant non-dogmatism.

Nevertheless, it is a general opinion of religious scholars that religion, the object of their studies, contains something that is beyond empirical inquiries or, to say, something a priori. This attitude has prevailed in the main stream of the science of religion or the history of religions. Thus we may say that science of religion has maintained a unique methodological attitude: an empiricism that accepts a priori.

Empiricism and a priori contradict to each other. Therefore the empiricism accepting a priori is somehow unnatural, and generates theoretical confusions and conflicts.

An instance of the confusion can be seen in the theories of the sacred, which is a cardinal concept in the phenomenology of religion. Phenomenology of religion takes morphology as its major tool to deal with the various ways the sacred manifests itself. In other words, phenomenologists of religion use morphology to see how the sacred manifests itself to man or the self. At the moment the sacred manifests itself to the self, the self encounters the sacred. This kind of task implies a theoretical presupposition or, in other words, a priori that the sacred is a circumlocution of God, who exists outside the self or human existence.

We can find out two things here. First, the phenomenological presupposition or a priori reflects monotheistic worldview. Therefore, phenomenological arguments are basically theological, whatever intellectual and rational inferences they may draw.

In this regards, phenomenology of religion is a sister of Christian theology. What makes it different from theology is the phenomenologists' assertion that they intend to avoid dogmatic claims. Secondly, we can see that

phenomenology of religion employs the metaphysical construction of the Western tradition, that is, essence- phenomena or numina-nomina. Considering these things, we may say that the phenomenology of religion reflects the Western intellectual heritages.

It is true that phenomenology of religion represents the major theoretical stand point of the contemporary science of religion, and no powerful alternative perspective has been established yet. Therefore, it can be said that the science of religion so far has maintained its academic identity within the Western intellectual and religious tradition.

The phenomenological presupposition that the sacred exists outside the human self was best described by Rudolf Otto's idea of numinose. His book, *The Idea of Holy*, is undoubtedly a correct and powerful report on monotheistic religious experiences. However, the Western diea of the sacred is not so much applicable to the Eastern religious experiences. For instance, Eastern religions do not find the object of religious experience outside the self, but within it. Therefore, Eastern religions do not know of such an experience of "encountering the absolute other" as represented by Otto's concept of numinose. Their religious experiences are those of "self-awareness of the true reality within the self." In other words, Eastern religions are all about how to discipline the self and lead it upward to certain exalted states of human existence. In this sense, Eastern religions are gradational: they are about gradational processes of experiences leading toward higher states of human existence by means of progressive disciplines. There is no dramatic encounter with "absolute other." And the idea of the sacred is vague in Eastern religious traditions.

The sacred is nothing but a circumlocution of God, a dogmatic presupposition or a priori of the Western monotheistic tradition. However, the main stream of science of religion has been so heavily depending on the idea of the sacred, that it has made dual methodological mistakes. Firstly, it has created a serious confusion by itself by holding both empiricism and dogmatic premises of monotheistic tradition in its theoretical systems.

However, phenomenologists would argue only for empiricism by saying that they put brackets on dogmatic concepts and intend to disclose the religious man's internal experiences. They mean that their studies are empirical, concerned with the universal form of human religious experiences, not with dogmatic contents. Secondly, the monotheistic premises underlying their methodology are quite unapplicable to non-monotheistic religions. Therefore, the main stream methodology of science of religion should be seriously reconsidered, and more refined empirical methods have to be established.

The methodological confusion mentioned above is grounded in the distinctive academic concern of phenomenology, that is, its scrutiny into the subjectivity of religious phenomena. Subjectivity becomes a central issue when "understanding" is concerned, since "understanding" is a matter of two-way traffics between the subjectivities of the observer and the observed.

A religious phenomenon, the observed, is an expression of human religious experience. In other words, every religious phenomenon contains internal or subjective experience of man. Therefore, in order to understand a given religious phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the subjective reality of the experiencer.

Understanding is primarily an epistemological event, which occurs in the realm of the self's subjective cognition. Therefore it is natural that the self's cognition be emphasized when subjectivity of understanding is concerned. That is what phenomenology of religion and hermeneutics as its descendent are all about. So called the "creative hermeneutics" is also based upon the same methodological concern. Phenomenological tradition then has come to confine itself within the premise of observer's own intellect and conscientiousness. It has fallen into a kind of self-centered subjectivism, and thus cannot but fail to understand the internal reality of "the other," that is, the observed.

A religious phenomenon is an expression, in a cultural form, of subjective religious experience. In every religious phenomenon, the religious man's subjective experience is embedded. Here, we can see dual subjectivities

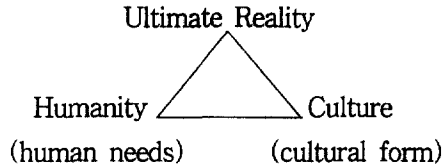
involved in understanding a religious phenomenon: the subjectivity of the observer and that of the observed. Which one is more important for better understanding? For a better understanding of a religious phenomenon, the observer should control his own personal opinion, and do every effort to disclose the subjective reality of the observed as it is. This is supposed to be the right way of understanding. Now, then, should we take this way of understanding as subjective or objective? Today, no one would say that he is able to control his own subjectivity completely. Anyhow, modern scientific researchers intend to control subjective judgment in order to ensure their studies are objective and valid as much as possible. The right understanding mentioned above can be said to be objective in this sense, although not in the sense of "absolutely objective."

Some phenomenologists of religion may argue that understanding is a matter of empathy, and thus understanding is impossible without observer's will and intellect. However, empathy pertains only to the attitude of understanding, not to the result. Seen from this perspective, phenomenology of religion may be a right attitude of understanding at the best, but does not necessarily ensure right understanding. A right attitude can often bring an invalid result.

The validity of an understanding is ensured in direct proportion to its objectivity. To ensure objectivity, it is important to control personal judgment above all. Nevertheless, subjectivism does not furnish a checking point to control personal judgment, but tends to reflect personal preference. Subjectivism is apt to lead to a psychological or subjective relativism being equivalent to saying, "This understanding is right and true, because I honestly believe so" or a theoretical parochialism. It is needless to say that both subjective relativism and theoretical parochialism are methodologically defective. And one of the most serious defects of subjective relativism and theoretical parochialism is that they limit our scope so that we can see only partial aspects of such a complex phenomenon as religion.

A religious phenomenon consists of three factors: the Ultimate Reality;

human needs; and cultural forms. It can be diagramed as follows.



The Ultimate Reality is practically unspeakable, and it is rather bracketed. If one intends to speak about it, he begins to either examine the dogmatic contents of given theological treatises, or create a new dogmatic system. Therefore, it is better for science of religion not to deal with the Ultimate Reality itself. Nonetheless, it is true that something can be "religious" only when it is related to the Ultimate. In this sense, the Ultimate is the unique criterion to distinguish the religious from the non-religious.

The humanity factor indicates human existential drive or yearning. It has been termed in various ways: primordial yearning; ontological drives; religious needs, human needs, and so forth.

Culture is the third component of religion. A real religion is always dressed in a cultural form. It never exists as a pure abstract concept or idea.

A religious phenomenon consists of the three components mentioned above.

When there are all the three factors, a real religious phenomenon comes to exist. If any one of them is missing, it is incomplete.

In the triangular structure of the three components, the relation between the Ultimate Reality and Humanity (UH dimension) is an essential constituent of a religious experience. When a man experiences something in relation to the Ultimate, it is called a religious experience. Therefore, the UH dimension is essential for all religious phenomena. On the other hand, the relation between Humanity and Culture (HC dimension) represents a socialization process, which is not religious by itself.

And the third dimension, the relation between Culture and the Ultimate Reality, is not practically detected in the realm of human history.

The phenomenological tradition in science of religion has been only concerned in the UH dimension and tended to ignore the HC dimension. As a result, only a partial aspect of religious phenomenon has been paid attention. It is true that the UH dimension is essential to religious phenomena. However, an essence does not represent a whole phenomenon. This is also true with a religion.

The study of religion should deal with both the UH and the HC dimensions.

The former is the area of phenomenological inquiries, while the latter is that of historical and sociological studies. Either phenomenological or socio-historical studies concentrate their theoretical concern on a partial aspect of religion. In the next chapter, some problems of socio-historical studies will be examined, and for now, let us continue our present discussion.

We have seen that a religious phenomenon consists of two dimensions: human ontological drive and cultural ingredients or in other words, form and contents, or context and contents. For an example, let us examine "faith," a distinctively religious phenomenon. Faith or belief consists of two factors: belief or confidence, which is a state of human mind (Humanity factor); and the contents of the belief (Culture factor). When one says, "I believe in Jesus Christ," he means that he is confident that the following dogmatic message is true: "Jesus Christ is the redeemer of myself and the world." Therefore, the content of his belief is a historically given dogma.

Dogmatic contents (Culture factor) are contained within the context of human need of religious yearning (Humanity factor). Without historically given contents, religious yearning cannot function. Meanwhile, no religious phenomena come to exist without human needs. Therefore, human needs and cultural factors are interdependent in the process of arising of a concrete religious phenomenon.

3. Reductionism and Religion Itself

Science of religion, as we all know, has had four turning points in regards of its methodological concern: the origin of religion; the structure of religion; the meaning of religion; and the totality of religion. However, one and the same academic intention has been retained throughout all the stages: to see "religion as it is." In each stage, a new perspective emerged and the previous stage was criticized: for its partial or insufficient understandings of religion; for having taken its partial and incomplete understandings as perfect; and for having thus substituted reality and truth with its partial and incomplete view. In other words, the main point of the criticism was that the previous stages fell in reductionism.

In science of religion, reductionism has indeed been a perennial issue, whether sometimes overtly discussed and sometimes not. At first, the founders of science of religion intended to establish a new academic discipline independent of theology. At least theoretically, they opposed to dogmatism or faith-perspective that was concerned in normative judgments that substituted reality and truth with a given value system.

In this regard, they were against a kind of dogmatic reductionism. Next, phenomenologists and advocates of hermeneutics clearly addressed anti-reductionism.

Then came sociological and psychological studies intending to build up their theories by means of inductive inquiries, so as to be labelled theoretical studies. However, their theoretical studies are also blamed for reductionism now, since they reduced living reality of religious phenomena to one or more sociological or psychological factors.

Finally, multi-disciplinary and holistic approaches are proposed by contemporary scholars. They are willing to acknowledge two things: that religion is too complicated to be handled with a single theory of perspective; and that no one theory or perspective was successful in disclosing the

totality of a religious phenomenon throughout the history of science of religion for the last one century. To accept these must be painful. However, it is a denouncement of the past shortfalls and a proclamation of a new start.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that although multi-disciplinary approach is insisted as a requirement for a new start, it itself cannot constitute a practical methodology as a systematic tool to deal with concrete religious phenomena. It is because an assembly of partial scopes cannot constitute a scope big enough to see the totality. Simple multi-disciplinary approach can not satisfactorily meet the demand for a new scope for the totality of religion as it is. In other words, it cannot fulfill the wish to overcome all kinds of reductionism. Therefore, insofar as methodology is concerned, we now face a very important turning point: we should leave behind the confusions of the past and present conflicts and search for a truly new start.

Science of religion struggled with the antagonism between reductionism and anti-reductionism for the last one century. This antagonism has confined out theoretical scope to see only either one of the two dimensions of religion: that of human internal experience of the Ultimate (UH) and that of cultural forms in which human internal experiences are expressed (HC); or, in other words, that of phenomenological concern and that of socio-historical concern.

4. History and Society

There has risen some strong demands for a kind of reductionist approach in the main stream of our discipline. It is proposed basically for two reasons: that modern empirical study should overcome a priori premise; and that the empirical study should employ more systematic and tangible methodologies. Therefore, social scientific approaches are preferred for the reason they, unlike phenomenology, oppose to any a priori or theoretical premise. Consequently, major theoretical arguments in our discipline are mostly made by either of the two opposing camps: socio-historical studies and

phenomenological studies.

We have seen that phenomenological study is unable to deal with Eastern religious experiences, because of its monotheistic worldview. We have to overcome phenomenology or reconstruct its methodological point of view from an entirely new angle. However, it should be noted that socio-historical point of view also has the same kind of problem and thus it is not applicable to Eastern religions.

Social sciences are grounded in distinctively Western view of human, namely, individualism. Individualism is the view that human self is the unique agent of will and action, and that it thus is the center of responsibility for will and action. The self is the independent and unique agent, having a strong awareness, "I am different from others." This awareness provides the sense of self-identity or "personality," the ground for distinction between the self and the others. Since the 13th century Renaissance artists in Florence expressed personality in their paintings, personality became the matrix of the Western view of human as an individual. As long as one stands upon this Western anthropology, he would not be able to see the internal reality of the Eastern religious experiences. As mentioned earlier, human is seen as just a part of universe in the East. The human individuality is just a temporarily given condition, not an eternally unchanging agent. Therefore, an individual is not an island isolated from the others. In a sense, there is no Western concept of the self in the East. Now, imagine how a social scientist would evaluate easterners' views and actions when they are not aware of the self? The cannot but be seen as irrational to the Western social scientist. Then he would never be able to appreciate the gradational experiences that Eastern religions are all about. Therefore, the reductionist approaches proposed by social sciences also have serious limitations for an appropriate study of Eastern or non-Western religions.

Here we can see that the two major theoretical camps, phenomenology and socio-historical studies, share the same kind of obstacles and limitations for construction of a universally applicable theoretical viewpoint. Scientific

studies of religion, regardless of whatever name they may be given, should construct a new methodological system with universal applicability, in order to fulfill the spirit marked by the Meilanderian dictum.

The third camp of contemporary scientists of religion is formed by those who propose multi-disciplinary approaches. As mentioned earlier, the multi-disciplinary or holistic approaches are not based upon an organized theoretical system, but rather proposed as a kind of appeal or postulation for a new system. Those who propose multi-disciplinary approaches have an intention to overcome the limitations of the traditional theories of both phenomenological and socio-historical studies. However, despite of their healthy intention, multi-disciplinary approaches turn out to be quite confusing in practical application.

Methodologically speaking, a classification system should meet two conditions: that the system must be inclusive enough to cover all the phenomena in their entirety; and that its categories should be mutually exclusive. In other words, it should contain enough variety of categories to cover reality in its entirety, while each category is not be overlapped. Joachim Wach's classification system of man's religious experiences meet these dual requirements perfectly. His triple categories of thought, practice and fellowship are mutually exclusive. No religious phenomenon can be found that does not fall in one of these categories. So his system covers the reality in its entirety. It seems that the prudence and the durability of his classic studies are grounded in his sound classification system.

In contrast, the classification system with six and/or eight dimensions of religion proposed by Ninian Smart, a leading advocate of multi-disciplinary approaches, fails to meet either of the two theoretical requirements. What is more important is that he has not been seriously challenged for this methodological mistake, but rather appreciated for his leadership in the movement of multi-disciplinary approaches. Once again, we can see that the academic society of religious studies today is in a serious confusion: haunted by the urgent need for a new approach, it seems to have lost the sobriety to

check out the validity of suggested theoretical systems. We are stuck in this confusion. Do have a way out? We have had a lesson from the above discussions that the all the three major camps of the contemporary religious studies have failed to establish a persuasive and universally applicable method. We could also see that they had the same reason for their failure: that they saw religion as an assembly of parts, and they intended to understand each part separately; and that, as a result, their analytic perspective failed to see the organic integrity, in which each part comes to get its function and on the basis of which a religion exists as an organic unit of all the components.

5. Conclusion

A diagnosis itself provides a remedy. We have found that the methodological limitations of science of religion have resulted, primarily, from an analytic perspective seeing each component of religion separately and taking a religious phenomenon as an assembly of parts. The way to overcome the limitations lies in seeing a religious phenomenon as an organic unit of the three components: the Ultimate Reality; human needs; and cultural factors. However, as mentioned earlier, the Ultimate Reality itself is not manifest to empirical studies. Therefore, only two dimensions are practical constituents of a concrete religious phenomenon for a scholar to see: the dimension of human internal experience of the Ultimate Reality (UH); and that of the cultural expressions of the experience (HC).

The same is true not only with a simple religious phenomenon but also with a religious tradition as a whole. A religious phenomenon always comes into being within a larger religious tradition. It never exists as an independent island separate from the tradition. It is the religious tradition that provides systematic interpretation of the human needs to overcome existential finitudes and the ultimate way of life to live by. No religious

tradition may be of living value unless it is accepted by religious men and their community. In this regard, Wilfred Cantwell Smith's perspective gives us a good lesson, by representing a view that religious scholars should avoid. He takes "faith and a cumulative tradition" as two separate things. So his idea of religion turns out to be quite vague, unhelpful, and even hindering our studies of concrete religions or religious phenomena. It is clear that this problem comes from his view separating faith from tradition. We must see that faith is formed within a tradition, and a tradition is maintained by faith. They are interdependent by their nature.

When a scholar is concerned in faith, he tends to have a phenomenological viewpoint, as Wilfred C. Smith did. Phenomenological viewpoints take up the UH dimension of religious phenomena. Since the UH dimension is related to the very essence of human religious experiences, the theories based upon phenomenological viewpoints appear to be of a grand scale. Mircea Eliade was a distinctive representative of grand-theorists. He saw human yearning for "the freedom from history" in religious phenomena, and his vistas penetrated into ahistorical category.

However, the grand scale of his perspective is too large to handle concrete and practical issues of contemporary religions. Phenomenology and hermeneutics have been primarily concerned in *homo religiosus*, the religious man of an ideal image.

They meanwhile tend to ignore real history and the historical dynamics by which human life is formed and maintained. Thus the grand perspectives have made it difficult for us to develop systematic methodological tools to see and handle concrete religious phenomena in history with.

On the other hand, socio-historical approach, as the counterpart of phenomenological approach, tends to have a narrow perspective. It has formed the camp of "specialists" in contrast to that of "generalists." Many socio-historians are engaged in areal studies, or in studies of detailed specific issues of religion. Social scientists are engaged in studies of the social aspects of religion, and are often accused of reductionism. All of them share

one and the same point: their scopes are too narrow and specific to see religion as an organic unit and to understand the overall processes of human religious history.

Here, a middle range perspective is postulated in order to overcome the weak points of both grand-theorists' and specialists' perspectives. It is a view of religion as an organic unit. It would allow us to deal with all the concrete issues raised in the major areas of religious studies: How has a particular religious phenomenon been changed historically?; how are social conditions and worldviews mutually influenced?; how are human ontological yearnings expressed in individuals' lives in concrete historical situations?; and what kind of meaning does a given religious worldview have to my "self" and my own "being"? The idea of a religious tradition as an organic unit would provide ways to articulate answers to above questions from all the dimensions of religious studies.

A tradition functions to fuse all the historical ingredients into a unit. The energy for this fusing function is supplied by individual religious men and their community that positively accept the tradition. This is a dynamic perspective, different from Smith's static view. In a tradition, a worldview is formed and transformed from one generation to the next. Syncretic developments of religious cultures are made by mutual interactions of concrete traditions, and we can understand the changes of religious cultures through scrutinies into the interactions.

Religion as an integrated organic unit can be seen when we overcome analytic attitude that dissects religion into separate components, more specifically, when we do not separate faith from culture, human ontological drives from cultural conditions, and essence from manifestations. What we need is a new approach with an organic viewpoint.