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Religious Diversity and Contemporary Societies: Toward New Perspectives in Religious Studies

Sawai Yoshitsugu*

Abstract

In contemporary Asian societies such as Taiwan, India, and Japan that are marked by “glocalization,” there exist diverse religious phenomena characterized by border transgressions (*ekkyō* 越境) of religions beyond social contexts. In order to understand the trends of contemporary Taiwanese religions, scholars of religious studies must grasp the characteristics of these religious phenomena as they exist in Taiwan. At the same time, it is necessary to reexamine the frameworks of religious studies in the Taiwanese religious context since these frameworks are derived from modern Western religious traditions. It is also important for the scholars of religious studies to clarify the characteristics of religions or the religious both from the viewpoint of the Taiwanese religious context and from the viewpoint of the globalization of religions. In order to grasp the structural relationship of religious phenomena within contemporary Taiwanese society, this paper attempts to propose new perspectives in religious studies in order to understand how religions contribute and give influences to Taiwanese society.

Keywords: glocalization, religious diversity, the framework of religious studies, diaspora, secularization of religion

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I. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, “globalization” has largely influenced ways of life and thinking in such contemporary Asian societies as Taiwan, India, and Japan. These societies are located in the dynamic interplay between globalization and localization in various fields such as culture, economy, and technology. At present, we often hear of the term “globalization” on many occasions throughout the world. The rapid development of communication technologies, promoted by the so-called “IT Revolution,” seems to tie up the contemporary world as if this world were a social organization or a global city. In fact, any event, which happens anywhere in Taiwanese society, can be immediately communicated to the four corners of the earth. In regard to the big earthquake which hit Japan on March 11 this year, this news was not only reported immediately in Taiwan, but also communicated all over the world. Thus, we can say that we live in a very epochal period. Moreover, in comparison to the fact that a McDonald’s restaurant can be found at any place not only in Taiwan but also anywhere in the world, globalization could also be called the “McDonaldization” of societies and cultures. In a sense, like other societies in the world, contemporary Taiwanese society also has been accelerating toward the globalization of life styles and values. From a historical viewpoint on religions, the tendency of globalization greatly influences religious traditions in Taiwan as well as those in other countries.

As the Taiwanese sociologist Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao points out, cultural globalization in Taiwan can be defined as “a profound process that has shaped the structural framework within which diverse cultural reflections are developed.” Moreover, in regard to the globalization in Taiwan, he argues that “the Taiwan experience of globalization as well as the localization of Western thinking and discourse in literature, social science, and social movements since the 1970s and 1980s demonstrates the diverse local reactions to cultural globalization.” In new social movements, for example, the Taiwan experience of globalization and localization “synthesized” Western discourses into “something culturally more acceptable to the Taiwanese public.”¹ In our understanding of the trend of

¹ Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” pp. 51, 61.

contemporary Taiwanese society as Hsiao suggests, it seems to me that a new perspective called “glocalization” may be effective for the analysis of the dynamic social structure. This term “glocalization” originally implies an orientation of the environmental sciences, characterized by the phrase, “Think globally and act locally.” It may represent the viewpoint of integrating both global and local orientations. This view may be effective to understand the contemporary Taiwanese situation of religious pluralism. With the compound perspective of “glocalization,” one may be able to observe the characteristics of the complicated phenomena of contemporary religions or the religious, which one could not grasp from previous viewpoints in religious studies. In this paper, with the theme of “religious diversity and contemporary societies,” I would like to explore the meanings of contemporary religions or the religious in Taiwanese society from the “glocal” viewpoint of religions.

In the field of history of religions, it is essential for historians of religions to understand the contemporary situation of religions. For in the contemporary Taiwanese society that is marked by “glocalization,” there exist diverse religious phenomena characterized by border transgression (*ekkyō* 越境)² of religions beyond social context. In order to understand these trends of contemporary Taiwanese religion, scholars of religious studies must grasp the characteristics of these religious phenomena as they exist Taiwan. At the same time, it is necessary to reexamine the frameworks of religious studies since these frameworks are derived from modern Western religious traditions. It is also important for scholar of religious studies to clarify the characteristics of religions or the religious both from the viewpoint of the Taiwanese religious context and from the viewpoint of the globalization of religion. In this paper, by taking hold of the structural relationship of religious phenomena with contemporary Taiwanese society, I attempt to propose new perspectives in religious studies in order to understand how religions contribute and give influences to Taiwanese society.

² “Border transgression” normally refers to the physical crossing of national or natural boundaries. In religious studies, however, it refers to a person of one religion or philosophical system borrowing from another religion or philosophy, resulting in an organic situation.

II The Coexistence of Religions in Taiwanese Society

Before I discuss the theme of this paper, allow me to briefly mention what the term “religious diversity” means in the contemporary world. There are many religious traditions that hold different doctrines and faiths. The coexistence of religions provides us with the presence of different “worlds of meaning” or worldviews based on the various perspectives of reality. The “worlds of meaning” or worldviews, held in such religious traditions as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, constitute complicated situations of religious diversity. In these situations, each of these semantic worlds constructs a “cosmos,” which contains a cumulative framework of life and thought through the semantic articulation by language. The American sociologist of religion Mark Juergensmeyer regards the confrontation of religious worldviews, derived from the coexistence of plural “worlds of meaning,” as a “cosmic war.” With the term “cosmic war,” Juergensmeyer attempts to clarify the implications of such problems as local disputes and varieties of terrorism, while focusing on religious worldviews.³

For example, in contemporary India, it is true that from the historian viewpoint of religions, the situation of “cosmic war” may be characterized by the antagonism between Hinduism and Islam that is organically connected with such factors as politics and culture. But this may not be the same case with contemporary religions in Taiwanese society. Here in Taiwan, monastic Buddhist traditions such as Pure Land and Chan, practiced by monks and nuns in monasteries, are isolated from the common people, while lay Buddhist traditions contain various aspects stemming from Confucian thought, Daoist rites, and folk religious practices. Based on anthropological fieldwork on Taiwanese folk religion, Chang Chia-Lin of Aletheia University argues that Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and other religious aspects are amalgamated in Taiwanese folk religion and that folk religious rituals represent the “phenomena of localization” of these aspects.⁴ At present, however, as we will

³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*.

⁴ Chang Chia-lin 張家麟, *Taiwan zongjiao ronghe yu zaidihua* (Religious Syncretism and Localization in Taiwan—focus on Rituals of the Taiwan Folk Religion) 臺灣宗教融合與在地化, pp. 12-13.

discuss below, it is noteworthy that there is a certain tendency of new Buddhist movements in Taiwan that are closely involved in social welfare, medical services, etc.

But as you may know, in South Asian areas, there is confrontation between India and Pakistan with regard to Kashmir region. The Indian government calls the Indian nation a “secular state,” although more than eighty percent of its people are Hindus. India is different from Pakistan, which regards Islam as its national religion. In the disputed situation between India and Pakistan, the so-called “cosmic wars” brought about by Islamic and Hindu fundamentalists abound, inducing an increase in terrorism. In regard to the confrontation of various religious worlds of meaning, the famous Japanese philosopher Toshihiko Izutsu, who was familiar with Islamic philosophy and East Asian philosophy, argued that this represents a “period of transition” toward the globalization of the world:

At present, an international society is being discussed as an important issue. Toward the construction of the internationally unified world, however, various elements should be included in it. In the case of nations, various elements constitute cultural patterns or paradigms. Thus, it is natural that they collide. It seems to me that only beyond collision, international societies could be truly built. Now, we live in the condition of severe crisis as the period of transition. I think that we may pass through crises.⁵

Izutsu mentioned these words in a dialogue with the Japanese famous novelist Ryōtarō Shiba. This dialogue appeared in the January edition of the famous Japanese Journal *Chuō-kōron* [“Central Public Opinion”] in 1993 when “fundamentalism” came to influence the world. In that year, the clash of civilizations began to appear as one of the important issues in the world. Izutsu said, “I think that we may pass through crises.” In response to his words, Shiba said, “Certainly, it has become a bright story.”

In several areas of the world, the confrontation between nations with fundamentalism produces hatred, and then, hatred produces retaliation. In this sense,

⁵ Izutsu Toshihiko 井筒俊彦, “Nijusseiki-matsu no yami to hikari,” (Darkness and Light at the End of the Twentieth Century) 二十世紀末の闇と光.

the contemporary world is faced with such chains of violence. These problems reflect the contemporary situation of many societies, in which there exist clashes of “cultural paradigms” or “religious paradigms.” Thinking of such conditions, Shiba was very impressed with Izutsu’s words that “only beyond collision, international societies could be truly built.” As Izutsu pointed out, “only beyond the collision” of cultural paradigms or religious worlds of meaning, humankind can truly establish the globalization of the world and deepen the understanding of religious diversity.

In Taiwanese society, no doubt, there may be political conflict with Mainland China, but there seems to be no evidence that the different “worlds of meaning” or worldviews, provided by religious traditions, has resulted in serious religious and cultural conflict and clash. In Taiwanese society, the Ministry of the Interior recognizes twenty-seven “conventional” and “legitimate” religions. Moreover, there are about 250 religious movements today, including new religions from abroad and the revitalized movements of local traditional Buddhism.⁶ The coexistence of these specific religious movements implies that of different religious worldviews, derived from the different “readings” or interpretations of reality. In Taiwanese society, it is especially characterized by the “multiple coexistence” of religious worldviews. As the historian of religions Milton M. Chiu demonstrates, Taiwanese religion can be divided into two types: the “family cult” and the “community cult.” The family cult consists of ancestor worship, the worship of deities, such as Kuan-kung, Matsu, earth gods, and Bodhisattvas, and the rites of passage. Almost all Taiwanese people observe this family cult just as it has been traditionally held in Japanese society. In contrast, the community cults include “the state cult, the religions associated with the Confucian shrine, the Buddhist monastery, the Taoist temple, the folk temple, and the individual cults of various religious associations.”⁷ Moreover, according to the results of a collaborative research by Yen-zen Tsai at National Chengchi University with four other historians of religions, 67.6 percent of those who were interviewed believe in the “transmigration after life.”⁸ The result of this research

⁶ Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” p. 62.

⁷ Milton M. Chiu, “Taiwanese Religions,” In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol 14, p. 253.

⁸ Tsai Yen-zen 蔡彥仁, “Taiwan ni okeru taishu no sigo-kan no bunseki,” (An Analysis of Views of the Afterlife in Contemporary Taiwan) 台湾における大衆の死後観の分析, p.

provides the fact that Taiwanese people are largely influenced by Buddhist faith. At the same time, 71.3 percent of those interviewed believe that “they could obtain the protection of ancestors if they perform rituals for their ancestors at designated days.”⁹ Accordingly, one can understand how Confucian ethics are influential among Taiwanese people.¹⁰ Such religious data specifically suggests the coexistence of religious worldviews.

Let me clarify which religious and cultural factors enable the coexistence of religions in Taiwanese society. It seems to me that we can elucidate these factors from the broader socio-cultural context of East Asia, not merely within the Taiwanese social context. In East Asian societies, one could regard the coexistence of religions as religious phenomenon, derived from the diaspora of religions or the religious. Of course, this term diaspora historically refers to the diffusion of Jews in the world; after 70 C.E., they were forced to move from Jerusalem to other areas of the world. In contemporary religious studies, however, scholars of religious studies use the term diaspora in a broader sense, implying religious diffusion and accompanied by the globalization of the world. As the Chinese philosopher Tu Wei-ming points out, the East Asian region is “Confucian” in regard to politics, social ethics, and the habit of heart.¹¹ In short, the “Confucian” factors are characteristic of religion and culture in East Asian societies. East Asian religion and culture are characterized by a “mode of nondichotomous thinking” or a “holistic mode of thinking” as Tu Wei-ming emphasizes, not by dichotomous worldviews which one typically sees in the West.

In the modern West, such worldviews associated with dichotomies of spirit and matter, mind and body, sacred and profane, God and human beings, and subject and

176.

⁹ Tsai Yen-zen 蔡彦仁, “Taiwan ni okeru taishu no sigo-kan no bunseki,” (An Analysis of Views of the Afterlife in Contemporary Taiwan) 台湾における大衆の死後観の分析, p. 176.

¹⁰ Milton M. Chiu, “Taiwanese Religions,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol 14, p. 253. Tsai Yen-zen 蔡彦仁, “Taiwan ni okeru taishu no sigo-kan no bunseki,” (An Analysis of Views of the Afterlife in Contemporary Taiwan) 台湾における大衆の死後観の分析, p. 176.

¹¹ Tu Wei-ming, “Implication of the Rise of ‘Confucian’ East Asia,” pp. 195-196, 201.

object are prominent, while East Asian societies are traditionally characteristic of holistic modes of thinking or worldviews. In East Asian societies, since religious elements have been and continue to be closely related to social, cultural, economical, and political aspects, the sacred and the secular have not been clearly divided. According to the Japanese philosopher Yūjirō Nakamura, East Asian societies construct a “Confucian sphere of culture,” based upon the common foundation of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist religious traditions. In regard to Confucianism, Nakamura regards it as a “practical science of national administration and relief as well as a religion.”¹²

In the cultural sphere of East Asian, it is noteworthy that Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist religious traditions have built a common cultural foundation through the so-called diaspora phenomena. Buddhism was brought from India to China and further, from China and the Korean Peninsula to Japan and Buddhist sūtras were introduced to China where they were translated into Chinese one after another. In the process of Chinese acceptance of Buddhist faith, Buddhism was gradually transformed. In China, Buddhist sūtras, written in Sanskrit and Central Asian languages, were translated into Chinese and incorporated into the culture of Chinese characters. In Korea and Japan, Chinese Buddhist documents, translated into Chinese, were accepted without translating them into their languages. In East Asia, Buddhist sūtras, translated into Chinese, became the common property of the religious culture, but the modes of accepting and transforming them varied in countries and areas. Like Confucianism, Buddhism built the religious and philosophical foundation of the cultural sphere of Chinese characters in East Asian societies. Thus, the close relationship between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in East Asia was historically fixed beyond national boundaries.¹³ It is no exaggeration to say that the history of religious culture in East Asia was one characterized by the border transgression of religions. In short, one can say that these religious and cultural factors constructed the common foundation of “multiple coexistence” of religious worldviews not only in Taiwanese society but also in other East Asian countries.

¹² Tu Wei-ming, “Implication of the Rise of ‘Confucian’ East Asia,” pp. 195-196.

¹³ Nakamura Yujiro 中村雄二郎, “Jukyō-bunka-ken,” (Confucian sphere of culture) 儒教文化圈, pp. 86-90.

III. Globalization, Religion, and Culture

By focusing on the transformation of religion and culture from the perspective of the border transgression of religions, one can observe the relationship of religion and culture with world globalization. At first, the influence of the development of media is eminent in the border transgression of religions in the contemporary world. For example, Islamic fundamentalists who hold the views of anti-Westernization also develop strategies for using the latest means of communication. Although they are hostile to modernization, they participate in its benefits. The fact that these fundamentalists actively work with the newest technologies beyond national borders may demonstrate the specific relationship of contemporary religion and culture with world globalization.

In order to understand the dynamics of religion and culture with the globalization of the world, I would like to pay attention to the result of a research project, chaired by Juergensmeyer, published in *Religion in Global Civil Society*.¹⁴ This book is suggestive for historians of religions to understand the significance of religion and culture in the contemporary world. On the basis of this research, I would like to reflect briefly on the role of religion in contemporary world from six main perspectives. The first perspective is that religion is necessary to maintain cultural tolerance in the process of the world globalization. Religious communities become dispersed in the diaspora. Thus, religious communities are necessary to practice cultural tolerance in addition to the acceptance of multiculturalism. This implies that in the contemporary changing world, any religious community itself has to change. In multicultural Taiwan, one could say that religious communities have practiced cultural tolerance. Second, religion needs to propose “global civil values.” Religions hold such traditional values as justice, tolerance, and respect to others; in globalizing societies, too, these values are necessary as “global civil values.” As Juergensmeyer argues, the shared values of different religious traditions can provide a collective sense of virtuous conduct in public life.¹⁵ Third, religion has a

¹⁴ Okayama Hajime 丘山新, “Kanyaku-buten to Kanji-bunka-ken—honyaku-bunka-ron,” (Chinese Buddhist scriptures and the East Asian cultural sphere—Translation of Cultural Theory) 漢訳仏典と漢字文化圏—翻訳文化論—, pp. 3-35.

¹⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer ed., *Religion in Global Civil Society*.

responsibility to criticize immoral and unjust aspects which might arise during the process of globalization. At present, since events are immediately transmitted to all people in the world, religions are expected to provide “global civil values.” As discussed below, it seems to me that the ethical activities of Taiwanese new religions might especially promote these “global civil values.” The fourth perspective, on the contrary, suggests that in extreme cases religions have the possibility of promoting the anti-globalization of the world. As suggested above, Islamic fundamentalist groups support “anti-globalization,” and instead view modernization, promoted primarily by America in their eyes, as their enemy. It is noteworthy, that their anti-global networks in themselves are globalized. This fact does not clearly demonstrate a certain tendency of the border transgression of religions, but does suggest the capability of various globalizations. Criticism against globalization, as it is promoted by America, implies an alternative vision of globalization. Thus, for the fifth perspective, one has to recognize that religion is related to the capability of “many globalizations.”¹⁶ It implies that globalization does not only mean “the Americanized version of globalization” but also other versions of it. Islamic fundamentalist groups seem to argue for the “Islamic version of globalization” and its related values. In East Asia, for example, one might discuss the possibility of the “East Asian version of globalization.”

The sixth and final perspective suggests that the trend of globalization has the possibility to promote the construction of a “global religiosity.” According to Juergensmeyer, “one alternative vision of globalization is a world in which the shared sense of spirituality and morality forms, in a sense, a new kind of globalized religion.”¹⁷ One may say that a certain religious response to globalization could be a “new form of global religion, as religion continues to be shaped anew in a global age.” Those who belong to all the religious traditions may potentially commit

¹⁶ Peter L. Berger, “Introduction: the Cultural Dynamics of Globalization,” pp. 1-16.

¹⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer ed., *Religion in Global Civil Society*, p. 8. Moreover, quoting the words of the historian of religions Ninian Smart, Juergensmeyer emphasizes that the emergence of a spiritual and ethical dimension of global civil society—a “global higher order” of civility—would provide the cultural basis for international order and transnational regulations. Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer, “2009 Presidential Address: Beyond Words and War: The Global Future of Religion,” pp. 893-894.

themselves to “a kind of multicultural world civilization.”¹⁸ In this regard, we can say that the possibility of “a kind of multicultural world civilization” may correspond to the construction of what the sociologist of religions Robert N. Bellah calls “civil religion” in a global dimension.¹⁹ In our attempt to grasp “spirituality” as a very important global phenomenon in order to understand the dynamics of contemporary religions, the globalization of “civil religion” could be one important clue for understanding the border transgression of contemporary religions.

Moreover, as Hsiao quotes it in his article “Coexistence and Synthesis,” Peter Berger formulates four possible consequences for the intersection of globalizing forces and indigenous culture:²⁰

- (1) Replacement of the local culture by the globalized culture.
- (2) Coexistence of the global and local cultures without any significant merging of the two.
- (3) Synthesis of the global universal culture with the particular indigenous culture.
- (4) Rejection of the global culture by powerful local reaction.

In regard to Berger’s interesting typology, Hsiao says:

Overall, the above four globalizing forces have indeed been prevalent in Taiwan since the 1980s and have brought Taiwanese cultural patterns closer to the “imagined” global culture. However, this has not eliminated Taiwan’s cultural diversity; in fact, it has promoted much greater cultural heterogeneity.²¹

¹⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer ed., *Religion in Global Civil Society*, pp. 6-10.

¹⁹ Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion*.

²⁰ Cf. Peter L. Berger, “Four Faces of Global Culture,” pp. 23-29. Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” p. 50.

²¹ Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” pp. 50-51.

In other words, as Hsiao suggests, we may say that with the “coexistence” and “synthesis” of the global and local cultures, or in other words the “glocal culture” to which I refer, the above-mentioned four consequences have been organically interconnected in Taiwan. At the same time, while Taiwanese culture is mainly characteristic of the second and the third consequences rather than the first and fourth, we can say that Taiwan has promoted “much greater cultural heterogeneity.” In Hsiao’s words, “cultural patterns” in Taiwan are virtually “coproduced by globalization’s impacts and indigenous responses.”²²

IV. The Reality of Religion and Its Concept in Religious Studies

In our understanding of contemporary Taiwanese religions from the perspectives of the border transgression of religions or the “glocalization” of religions, we notice that there may be gaps between the reality of religions in Taiwanese society and those religious concepts derived from the Western religious tradition. Since the 1990s, in the field of the history of religions, there has been a tendency to reexamine religious concepts in religious studies, while locating them in particular religious contexts. Thus, for example, in regard to the question whether religious paradigms in contemporary history of religions can be generally valid for any religious tradition, we, as historians of religions, must answer that they are not always so. Religious paradigms, based on Western religious traditions, were constructed in the process of Christian religious tradition encountering non-Western religions. These religious concepts, originally derived from Western cultures and societies, embody dichotomous frameworks in the West. Thus, historians of religions must always reconsider the validity of conceptual frameworks in religious studies, while reexamining them in specific religious contexts in East Asian societies.

A main key-concept of this paper is the term “diaspora” or “border transgression,” which may be effective for understanding contemporary religion. At

²² Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” pp. 51.

first, allow me to discuss the border transgression of the term “religion” briefly. In this regard, Jonathan Z. Smith, a historian of religions at University of Chicago, points out that the term “religion” was gradually diffused in non-Western societies after the sixteenth century; with the border transgression of this term from Western societies to the non-Western ones, it was regarded as a universal category which could be fit to any culture and society.²³ With the passage of time, the same term “religion” was semantically articulated with different implications in different cultural contexts. Thus, since this term resulted in containing various inexhaustible connotations, the subtle differences between the concept “religion” and its reality semantically came to exist.

Historians of religions must deconstruct previous theories and concepts of religion that are based on Western religion as a model, especially in East Asian societies, but also throughout the contemporary world. As the historian of religions Susumu Shimazono at the University of Tokyo emphasizes, based on contemporary situations of the world, the concepts and theories of “salvation religion” presupposing “doctrinal and organizational unity” do not work in understanding contemporary religious phenomena.²⁴ In light of the multi-religious condition in Taiwanese society, his observation may reflect the state of contemporary religions here in Taiwan. In contemporary Japanese societies, religious phenomena, such as “the religious” as “healing” and “spirituality” exist, but according to Western theories, these do not fit as “religion.” Whether it is called “religion” or not, it seems to me that there may be similar phenomena in Taiwan, for in regard to China’s religious life, Tu Wei-ming argues that “the quality of China’s religious life will be substantially shaped by more personal and inward practices, specifically the art of healing, which involves such exercises as *qigong* (breathing technique), *taiji* (shadow boxing), herbal medicine, and acupuncture.”²⁵ In any case, for historians of religions in Taiwan as well as in Japan, it is imperative that the contemporary study of religion should involve building a new paradigm for the understanding of

²³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” p. 269.

²⁴ Cf. Shimazono Susumu, “Contemporary Religion and Religious Studies: The Concept of ‘Religion’ in Post Axial Civilization,” pp.83-94.

²⁵ Tu Wei-ming, “The Quest for Meaning: Religion in the People’s Republic of China,” pp. 100-101.

religion. In light of religious data in a specific society and culture, religious concepts for religious studies should be reexamined in order to understand the reality of religion its related phenomena.

In order to obtain another clue for reconsidering the characteristics of religions in contemporary Taiwanese society, let me briefly mention the origin and meaning of the Japanese term “*shūkyō*,” originally translated into Japanese from the English word “religion” at the beginning of Meiji Era (1868-1912). There were traditionally such words as “*shū*” (sect) and “*shūshi*” (denomination), but in that period, the general word “*shūkyō*” was nonexistent. After this word came into existence, it came to imply an individual “faith” (*shinkō*), which individuals select respectively. About seventy percent of the Japanese people regard themselves as “non-religious” (*mu-shūkyō*), for they gradually came to recognize that “religion” may be identical with “faith” since the Meiji Era. It is noteworthy, however, that even those who regard themselves as “non-religious” are considerably “religious;” they commit themselves to such various “religious” activities as family grave visitation and pilgrimages to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, although they are not conscious that these activities may be characterized as religious. It is a characteristic of Japanese religion that these “religious” activities are not regarded as having religious meanings but merely as being customary. In regard to Japanese religious phenomena as daily customs, detailed research is underway, conducted by Japanese historians of religions.²⁶

Previously, in Japan, “spirituality” (*reisei*) was experienced in specific religious contexts, but today, it may be freely explored by individuals. In the past, spirituality was inseparable from religion, but many people who maintain a distance from organized religions feel at home with such phrases as “something great” or “higher power,” as opposed to God or Buddha. As Shimazono points out, this current turned

²⁶ In regard to Japanese religious phenomena as daily customs, Yanagawa Keiichi calls it “religion without faith” (in Japanese, *shinkō no nai shūkyō*). Cf. Yanagawa Keiichi 柳川啓一, *Gendai nihonjin no shūkyō* (Contemporary Japanese Religion) 現代日本人の宗教, pp. 5-27. Moreover, Miyake Hitoshi regards Japanese folk religion as the “invisible religion” (in Japanese, *mienai shūkyō*), for it is treated by the Japanese people as if it were a daily custom. Cf. Miyake Hitoshi 宮家準, *Nihon no minzoku shūkyō* (Folk Religion in Japan) 日本の民俗宗教, pp. 4-5.

into a striking cultural phenomenon during the 1970s through the 1980s.²⁷ Since new “spirituality” contains various movements and cultures and is comprised of a set of more amorphous and diversified phenomena, it is very hard for historians of religions to grasp its specific shape. In contemporary Japanese society, especially since the 1990s, the term “spirituality” has been frequently used among people. A number of people seek the healing of mind or something related to religion, although it may be different from “religion.” In order to understand such a variegated set of religious phenomena, the historians of religions need to reexamine the concept of “religion.” The extent to which new spirituality culture can be called “religion” depends upon how the term “religion” is used. The persons involved may say that their thoughts do not pertain to “religion.” Yet, we may argue that it is a faith in something great and can therefore be called “religion” if it presumes something that transcends scientifically verifiable reality. Moreover, Shimazono remarks:

In fact, those people who feel at home with the new spirituality culture are consciously searching for something that is different from organized religions or from modern science and rationalism. This self-awareness contains certain validity.²⁸

In the above-mentioned Japanese socio-cultural context, “new religions” (*shin-shūkyō*) and “new new-religions” (*shin shin-shūkyō*), which have provided many people with spiritual support, have developed their religious activities and extended their influence in contemporary Japan. In “new new-religions,” salvation, healing, and other mystical experiences have played important roles. It is noteworthy that traditional religions and organized religions do not always fail to respond to people’s troubles. From the side of traditional and organized religions, too, various attempts to explore new religious spirituality have been made. Since the 1970s, “new new-religions” have been promoting their influences in Japanese society, attracting human interests in spirituality.

²⁷ Shimazono Susumu, “Contemporary Religion and Religious Studies: The Concept of ‘Religion’ in Post Axial Civilization.”

²⁸ Shimazono Susumu, “Contemporary Religion and Religious Studies: The Concept of ‘Religion’ in Post Axial Civilization,” pp. 84-85.

Like the religious phenomena of “new new-religions” in contemporary Japan, “new religions” or “new religious movements” have been influential in contemporary Taiwanese society. According to Hsiao, such terms as “new religions” and “new religious movements” in Taiwan refer to either “the rise of many newly emerging religious sects from abroad” or “the revitalization of local traditional Buddhism.” In this regard, Hsiao says:

The popularization of both the new imported religions and a newly revitalized Buddhism can be seen as a religious response to meet the spiritual needs of the Taiwanese people who are under great pressure from over-modernization.²⁹

Many new religious faiths were imported to Taiwan from such countries as India, Japan, Vietnam, France, and America. During the period of Japanese rule in Taiwan before World War II, Shinto faith was introduced into Taiwan and Shinto shrines were built all over the island. In addition, Tenrikyo and Konkokyo along with such Buddhist movements as Tendai, Shingon, Jodo, Zen, Shin, and Nichiren were also introduced into Taiwan. After World War II, although Japanese religions ended in Taiwan, their religious influence has continued. In regard to the influence of Japanese Buddhism in Taiwan, Tsai also discusses it on the basis of his research on the religious experiences of contemporary Taiwanese people.³⁰

At present, it is argued that local Buddhism has entered a new era called “new religious renaissance.” Philosopher of religion Huei-nan Yang calls it a “Buddhist renaissance;”³¹ from a perspective of Buddhist studies, Chi-fu Lan regards this

²⁹ Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” p. 63.

³⁰ Milton M. Chiu, “Taiwanese Religions,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol 14, p. 254. Cf. Tsai Yen-zen 蔡彥仁, “Taiwan ni okeru taishu no sigo-kan no bunseki,” (An Analysis of Views of the Afterlife in Contemporary Taiwan) 台湾における大衆の死後観の分析, p. 176.

³¹ In an interview, Yang Huei-nan says: “Instead of staying passively behind temple walls chanting and meditating, monks and nuns are now traveling the streets to publicize their religion. You see them giving speeches, teaching meditation, and publishing books.” In this regard, see Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization

Buddhist tendency as “Neo-Chinese Buddhism.”³² New religious movements came as a result of “the rejuvenation of traditional Buddhism.”³³ Among the revitalized Buddhist groups, as Hsiao mentions, the most representative religious leaders and their temples are Master Cheng-Yen of Tzu-Chi on the east coast, Master Sheng-yen of the Dharma Drum Mountain in the north, Master Hsin-Yun of Foguangshan in the south, and Master Wei-Chieh of Chung-Tai Temple in central Taiwan. While most of the imported religious traditions “have focused their ‘religious practices’ on taking care of individual followers’ mental and emotional needs,” the common characteristic of these new Buddhist movements is that they are involved in “social welfare and medical services, education, publications, and environmentalism.” The “worldly approach” of these new religions has “dramatically changed the way religion has been practiced in Taiwan for centuries.”³⁴ Such new Buddhist groups as Tzu-Chi, Foguangshan, and Dharma Drum Mountain have been extending their religious activities to other countries. This fact represents a typical example of the globalization of Taiwanese religions.

and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” p. 63.

³² In his paper “The Formation of ‘Neo-Chinese Buddhism,’” Lan Chi-fu argues: “Originating from Chinese Buddhism, Taiwanese Buddhism has gradually developed its own new life after a hundred years of historical change. In the last 20 years, Taiwanese Buddhism has experienced dramatic changes and moved further away from Chinese Buddhism. This New formation of Taiwanese Buddhism is called Neo-Chinese Buddhism by researchers.” Cf. Lan Chi-fu 藍吉富, “The Formation of ‘Neo-Chinese Buddhism,’” 「新漢傳佛教」的形成—建國百年臺灣佛教的回顧與展望 p. 41.

³³ Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan.”

³⁴ Hsiao Michael Hsin-huang, “Coexistence and Synthesis: Cultural Globalization and Localization in Contemporary Taiwan,” p. 63. For example, as the title of his work *Establishing Global Ethics* suggests it, Master Sheng-yen of Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association stresses the “necessity of inter-faith exchange and dialogues” in that “every religion has its unique cultural background and belief system, resulting from its own historical development.” Cf. Master Sheng Yen, *Establishing Global Ethics*, pp. 4-5.

V. Toward a Hermeneutical Understanding of Religion

Now, one of the religious theories that historians of religions should re-examine carefully is the theory of the “secularization of religion” in Taiwanese socio-cultural context. Even though the reality of religion itself is the same, its reality could be naturally understood as a “different phenomenon” if a perspective of grasping it may be different. As discussed above, in the study of religions, one formerly had an academic tendency to understand East Asian religions by the application of religious theories derived from Western Judeo-Christian traditions. Thus, there have been attempts to understand various religious phenomena with a certain fixed typology based on Western religious views. In such a tendency of religious studies, Jonathan Z. Smith’s statements that “there is not data for religion” and “religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study,” are to some degree valid as a criticism against the previous study of religion.³⁵ At the same time, however, we have to acknowledge that it is not always true that “there is no data for religion.” There are the materials by themselves of “data for religion,” which support the interpretations of religion as representing “the creation of the scholar’s study.” When the materials are interpreted in separation from their religious contexts, the interpretation of religion results in being quite “the creation of the scholar’s study,” as Jonathan Z. Smith points out. But one could argue that even such a product of the scholar’s study is a description of religious reality from a specific perspective. Thus, we have to recognize that even though it contains biased preconceptions, it is still a discourse of the religious reality.

A specific example is the theory of the “secularization of religion” in Taiwan. In this regard, as suggested above, it is noteworthy that Yen-zen Tsai and four other historians of religions have compiled a collaborative research from 2008 to 2010, titled “A Comparative Study of Religious Experience in Taiwan.” According to the results, unlike those of Japanese society, about eighty percent of the Taiwanese population have such religious faiths as Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and folk religion; those who have no faith are merely about twenty percent.³⁶ Formerly,

³⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, p. xi.

³⁶ Tsai Yen-Zen 蔡彥仁, “Taiwan ni okeru taishu no sigo-kan no bunseki,” (An Analysis of Views of the Afterlife in Contemporary Taiwan) 台湾における大衆の死後観の分析, pp. 162-185.

however, from a sociological perspective on the basis of Western sociological theories of religion, Taiwanese society was regarded as having a tendency toward the “secularization of religion” in the process of modernization. According to Tsai’s description of Taiwanese religious experience, however, the trend toward the “secularization of religion” is never a “fact,” for the number of Taiwanese people, who have experienced demonic and spiritual powers, increases with the process of social and economical development and the ascent of educational level. In short, Tsai concludes that Taiwanese society does not show a trend toward the “secularization of religion” since most people in Taiwanese society have religious faith, while keeping images about the “world of afterlife.”³⁷

In order to accurately understand how religions contribute to and influence Taiwanese society, we must recognize, as Tsai also argues, that hermeneutical attitudes are necessary for the scholars of religious studies to understand Taiwanese religions. As the historian of religion Wilfred C. Smith emphasized, the understanding of religion means the faith of the living persons in their religious traditions. In his article, “Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?” W. C. Smith argues:

The externals of religion—symbols, institutions, doctrines, practices—can be examined separately; and this is largely what in fact was happening until quite recently, perhaps particularly in European scholarship. But these things are not in themselves religion, which lies rather in the area of what these mean to those that are involved. The student is making effective progress when he recognizes that he has to do not with religious systems basically but with religious persons; or at least, with something interior to persons.³⁸

Without a doubt, the contemporary study of religion has been developed on the basis of theories of religious studies proposed by such scholars as Max Weber, Mircea Eliade, and W.C. Smith. But W.C. Smith’s statement that religion “lies rather

³⁷ Tsai Yen-zen 蔡彦仁, “Taiwan ni okeru taishu no sigo-kan no bunseki,” (An Analysis of Views of the Afterlife in Contemporary Taiwan) 台湾における大衆の死後観の分析, pp. 162-185.

³⁸ Wilfred C. Smith, “Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?” p. 35.

in the area of what these mean to those that are involved” suggests that what is most significant for religious studies is to understand the commitments of “religious persons.” In his famous book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, W.C. Smith proposes that by the use of the two notions, “cumulative tradition” and “faith,” “it is possible to conceptualize and describe anything that has ever happened in the religious life of mankind, whether within one’s own religious community (which is an important point) or in others’ (which is also an important point).”³⁹

By the concept of “faith,” Smith means “personal faith,” which stands for “an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative or real.”⁴⁰ By the concept of “cumulative tradition” he means:

The entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe.⁴¹

Moreover, Smith argues that “the link between the two is the living person.” The result of the study of religion has to be academically estimated in so far as it is an academic discipline, but at the same time, the product of religious studies should be accepted by the “living person” of religious traditions. In religious studies, it is extremely difficult to achieve the aim of Smith’s proposal, but historians of religions should keep it in mind in research. When I was a Ph.D. candidate fellow at Harvard University’s Center for the Study of World Religions, I attended two of Smith’s courses. I clearly remember that he emphasized how it is important for historians of religion to be sympathetic to others’ faith. Thus, one can say that religious studies at the Center for the Study of World Religions has aimed at a sympathetic or hermeneutical understanding of religion.

³⁹ Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, pp. 156-157.

⁴⁰ Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 141.

⁴¹ Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 138.

VI. Conclusion

Finally, let me discuss the nature of religion briefly as a clue to proposing a semantic perspective in religious studies on the basis of a hermeneutical perspective of religion. In his famous book *Das Heilige*, Rudolf Otto clarified the uniqueness (*sui generis*) of religion, exploring the nature of religion at the deep dimension of religious experiences. In order to express the primordial meaning of “the holy” (*das Heilige*) in religion, or the non-rational and mystical experiences, Otto made the term “*das Numinöse*.”⁴² According to Otto, its content can be merely felt in religious experiences; it is impossible for us to grasp it conceptually. Since the 1980s, the debate over whether religious experience are genuine has continued among historians of religions. From a semantic perspective of religion, however, it is important for scholars of religious studies to recognize the “fact” that religious adherents regard the objects of their religious commitments as real and genuine. In religious studies, there has been a certain tendency for religions to be superficially understood as historically given “facts.” But as W.C. Smith argues, religions are not such external forms of religions as symbols, institutions, and doctrines; religions exist in the “meanings” which these external forms of religions have for their followers.

Thus, from a semantic perspective of religion, it is necessary for historians of religions to attempt to construct a new paradigm of religious studies on the basis of previous theories of religion. In order to achieve this attempt, they must understand the depth of meanings of religion, found at the deep dimension of religious phenomena as historical facts in their social and cultural contexts.⁴³ I think that this semantic approach to religion may be effective for understanding the significance of religions not only in Taiwanese and Japanese societies but also in other areas of the world. In order to understand how religions contribute and give influences to Taiwanese society, it seems to me that from a semantic standpoint of religious studies, we should open a perspective of understanding religious phenomena as

⁴² Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, pp. 6-7. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 7.

⁴³ In regard to the detailed discussion of a semantic perspective of religion, see Sawai Yoshitsugu, “Meanings of Life and Death in Asian Religious Traditions: a Semantic Perspective of Religion,” pp. 95-106.

consisting of the double structure of meaning in religion, both the superficial, exterior dimension of meaning and the deep, interior.

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宗教的多樣性與當代社會：對宗教研究的新視角

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摘要

當代臺灣、印度、日本的亞洲社會，都被形容成具有全球化的在地特性。在這些社會存在多樣性宗教現象的特質，也往往超越了他們社會的脈絡（日文：越境）。爲了理解當代臺灣宗教的趨勢，宗教學者必須抓住臺灣社會的宗教現象特質。同時，也有必要再次檢驗臺灣宗教研究的架構脈絡，因爲這套架構是源自於當代西方宗教傳統。對學者而言，掌握宗教的特質以及兼顧臺灣宗教本身脈絡與來自宗教的全球化觀點是相當重要的。爲了抓住當代臺灣社會中宗教現象的結構性關係，本論文嘗試提出宗教研究的新面向，以理解宗教的貢獻及宗教對臺灣社會的影響。

關鍵字：全球在地化、宗教多元性、宗教研究架構、離散、宗教世俗化

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