OBJECTIVITY AND BELIEF IN THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF SHIN BUDDHISM

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In his keynote address to the 12th Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies (IASBS) held at Musashino University in 2005 which was subsequently published by The Pure Land journal, James Dobbins has called attention to the complications related to the integration of Shin Buddhism into the academic study of religions. Dobbins individuates various reasons behind these complications, notably the scarce cohesiveness of the field of Religious Studies itself, and the concurrent development of Buddhist studies as an independent academic enterprise. Taking my cue from Dobbins’s observations and his claim that the various trends which currently characterize the field of Shin Buddhist studies may be seen as a sign of “energy and vitality,” in this paper I will specifically focus on the distinctive contribution that Religious Studies may offer to the academic study of Shin Buddhism. In this connection, I will define the ways in which a secular approach to the study of religious phenomena—such as that basically promoted by Religious Studies—differs from a faith-based or sectarian approach, and how their simultaneous presence may be seen as an enrichment and diversification to the study of Shin Buddhism.

Religious Studies: Defining the Field

As various studies have illustrated, similar to other social sciences Religious Studies (or the Study of Religions) traces back its origins as an academic discipline to the cultural milieu of the European Enlightenment and its emphasis on rationality, and to Romanticism’s rediscovery of a deeper dimension to religion. Besides the emphasis on textual studies, which is dependent on the tradition of biblical exegesis, the influence of Christian thought in the shaping of Religious Studies as an autonomous discipline was quite strong from its very inception. Already in the work of Max Müller (1823–1900), perhaps the first to acknowledge the
autonomous status of Religious Studies, the need to compare one’s own religion with all other religions and to be objective in one’s own conclusions is accompanied by his conviction that the new discipline “will restore to the whole history of the world, in its unconscious progress towards Christianity.”2 This tension between objectivity and religious commitment was destined to surface constantly during the development of the discipline. Thus, attempts to distinguish the new field of study from Theology did not exclude the intrusion of religious elements and bias in Religious Studies. This is the case, for example, of Rudolf Otto’s (1869–1937) concept of “the holy” as an a priori category that guarantees religion’s autonomy from other spheres of life, while on the other hand he claimed that Christianity possesses the sense of the holy “in unique clarity and abundance” and is thus superior to other religions.3 A concurrent aspect that may be noticed in Otto’s and other approaches, namely the great emphasis on “religious experience,”4 an idea heavily indebted to Christian Protestant thought, is revelatory of another major tendency in the development of the discipline, namely that which places interiority as the focus of the definition of religion. It is within this context that more recent attempts to define religion, such as Robert Baird’s (who also criticized Eliade) reference to “ultimate concern,” should be understood.5 These approaches have been criticized by other scholars for their “essentialism” or their scarce applicability to a broader range of religious phenomena. In not a few cases, however, the result has been the renouncing to the lowest common denominator of all religions, and the reliance on vague and unsatisfactory formulations such as that of a common “family ambiance” between various religious forms;6 or, in polemic with such an approach, even to the extreme conclusion that the category “religion” can be abandoned altogether.7 What emerges from this cursory discussion is indeed the difficult position occupied by Religious Studies, suspended as it is between the risk of relying too much on culturally biased definitions of the field of study, and that of losing its focus and disappearing as an autonomous discipline.

On the other hand, attempts to define the discipline, which are more directly related to the contributions of the social sciences and to functionally based definitions of the category of religion, seem to provide useful suggestions for going beyond this impasse.8 One recent attempt to provide a meaningful definition of religion is that formulated by Luther Martin, who characterizes religion as a social system that is legitimated
through the authority of some superhuman power." This formulation has the merit to avoid any reference to the "ultimate meaning of life," to fully acknowledge religion as a "social fact," and to allow the distinction between religion and other social subsystems. For example, as Martin notes, it precludes the analysis of Marxism as religion. In my research on Shin Buddhism I have been working with a very similar provisional definition of religion, according to which religion is a social subsystem that legitimates its claims through the authority of some superempirical agency. This minimalistic working definition is solid, yet flexible enough to function as the lowest common denominator of religion in both "western" and "non-western" contexts. If we apply this definition to Shin Buddhism, we may see that this traditional form of Japanese Buddhism also can be understood as a social subsystem, that is, a community of nenbutsu practitioners, that legitimates its claims through the authority of some superempirical agency, such as the Buddhist Dharma, Amida Nyorai 阿弥陀如来, the Pure Land (Jōdo,净土), and the final Buddhist awakening through birth in the Pure Land.

This working definition may also help to clarify some problems related to the integration of Shin Buddhism into the academic study of religions in Japan. As is well known, one of the characteristic (and puzzling, for many scholars) claims of most Japanese people is that they are "non-religious." Needless to say, this understanding of the terms "religion" (shūkyō 宗教) and "religious" has much to do with the way that Meiji ideologues manipulated Shintō and traditional religious values as "non-religious" in order to create an ideology for the modern nation-state, while formally acknowledging freedom of religion in the 1889 Constitution (which could pave the way to the revision of unequal treaties with the western colonial powers). However, it should also be remembered here that the current Japanese term shūkyō was chosen in order to translate the word "religion" found in those very diplomatic treaties, and came to be associated, almost from the very start, with western ideas of religion, doctrine, and belief. Putting aside the reliability of the claim that Christianity is doctrine-centered (which may be true especially for theologians, intellectuals, and religious professionals), it is apparent that mainstream Japanese religiosity focuses on a broad range of practices often related to the obtainment of worldly-benefits. In this regard, Shin Buddhism with its focus on shinjin 信心 represents an exception, though a very big and important one, within the field of Japanese religions, al-
though many nenbutsu practitioners also engage in practices which are generally discouraged by the institutions, such as religious activities at local Shintō shrines. Thus, reference to religion as a social phenomenon related to the legitimization of claims of authority through superempirical agencies, which may easily apply to mainstream Japanese religiosity in its various manifestations, can also help to overcome the ambiguities related to the use of the term “religion” within the Japanese context, and to better clarify the relationship between Shin Buddhism and Religious Studies.

**Objectivity and Belief**

We may then ask how Religious Studies differs from a faith-based or sectarian approach to the study of Shin Buddhism. In its mainstream self-understanding, Religious Studies is an academic discipline not aimed at promoting religion, but rather the analysis and explanation of religious phenomena. Today, it is promoted in various contexts and especially within the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), whose name still reveals the inheritance of the textual-historical bias in Religious Studies. Despite the variety of methodological emphases found in different scholarly approaches, the IAHR makes clear the aforementioned claim to scholarly objectivity and neutrality by stating on its website that the association “is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns.”

Another central premise of Religious Studies is that the explanations of religious phenomena and the theories through which they are pursued should be publicly testable. Therefore, this discipline is fundamentally different from Theology and other forms of doctrinal studies found in various religious traditions worldwide. These studies promote a particular religious viewpoint and their claims cannot be inter-subjectively tested. As a matter of fact, their assumptions are based on religious commitment and belief, which are subjective factors.

Broadly speaking, in the case of Shin Buddhism, Shinshūgaku 真宗教 (and to some extent Bukkyōgaku 仏教) occupies the place occupied by Theology in Christianity, and by other doctrinal studies in different religions. The starting point of Shinshūgaku is the belief in a set of doctrinal assumptions about Shin Buddhism, such as the effectiveness of Amida’s Vow (hongan 本願), other-power (tariki 他力), and salvation through birth
in the Pure Land (おう 往生). Of course, also within Shinshūgaku there may be differences among different scholars in the interpretation of the various aspects concerning doctrine and religious practice. Even the meaning of fundamental religious ideas may be placed under scrutiny and evolved through time, as is emblematically shown by the demythologization of the concept of the Pure Land promoted within Shinshūgaku by Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) and other scholars. However, the basic premise for being a Shin Buddhist scholar or Shinshūgakusha 真宗学者 is to be first of all a Shin Buddhist practitioner or believer. Therefore, a great deal of, though not all, the achievements of Shinshūgaku can be fully shared only within the Shin Buddhist community of believers.

On the other hand, the scope of Religious Studies is to analyze, describe, and explain various religious phenomena as objectively as possible. The fact that a degree of accuracy such as that of the natural sciences is never achievable in this field is acknowledged by scholars in Religious Studies, and in no way undermines their effort, as it is also the case, for example, for historians and sociologists. To be neutral and objective in Religious Studies, however, does not mean that Shin Buddhist practitioners and believers should be seen by the researcher as individuals engaged in odd or nonsensical activities. The relevance of understanding the viewpoint of the believer has been incorporated in mainstream Religious Studies at least since the time of William Brede Kristensen, who maintained that for the researcher the believers are “completely right,” and that “only after we have grasped this can we understand these people and their religion.” Therefore, the religious experience of the nenbutsu practitioners is simply taken into account without prejudice as relevant data to be described and analyzed. However, at the same time, a detached attitude from the side of the researcher is also required. He/she must maintain his/her position as an external observer, and there is, for example, no need for him/her to become a Shin Buddhist believer. On the other hand, it should also be said that there is no impediment whatsoever for a Shin Buddhist believer to research in the field of Religious Studies, provided that he/she conforms to the aforementioned requirements of objectivity and neutrality. Religious Studies is a question of method, not of belief.

In Religious Studies, religious phenomena are analyzed as both empirical and historical data. As in the case of Karel Dobbeleare’s approach to secularization theory, it is possible to distinguish at least three levels
of analysis of religious phenomena. The most comprehensive level is the societal level, which focuses on religion as one societal subsystem differentiated from other subsystems such as politics, science, or economy along functional lines. This level finds expression in the abovementioned working definition, where religion is presented as a social subsystem that legitimates its claims through the authority of some superempirical agency. In this respect, religion is fundamentally different from politics, science, and economy, which legitimize their claims in terms of power, truth, and money, respectively. The second level of analysis is the organizational one, which is strictly related to the study of religious institutions and groups. The third is the individual level. It should be made clear, however, that religious phenomena such as religious experiences and practices related to individuals are always culturally mediated, and that, broadly speaking, they are social facts as well. An extreme example of this is the particular position occupied by the founders of religious traditions. In the case of the founder of Shin Buddhism, Shinran 観 頑 (1173-1262), even if we consider him as an “individual” thinker and “the first Shin Buddhist,” it is possible to see that his religiosity was not something floating in a vacuum, but rather was understood by Shinran himself as being strictly related to the teachings of his master Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), the Pure Land tradition established by the other patriarchs, and, more in general, to centuries of social practice of the Buddhist Dharma. In other words, already in Shinran’s case, Shin Buddhism was a “social fact.”

According to the aforementioned perspective, Shin Buddhism as a social phenomenon can thus be approached through three different levels of analysis. In turn, the analysis may focus on historical data, or empirical data that are approached through the proper methods of the social sciences. Therefore, fieldwork is also an integral part of Religious Studies.

More specifically, it is possible to distinguish among the different aspects related to religion and Shin Buddhism. One way to approach this issue is Ninian Smart’s well-known classification of the seven dimensions of religion: experiential, social, narrative, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, and material. Although Smart used this classification to avoid the problem of an “essentialist” definition of religion, a similar approach may still be useful to distinguish different aspects of religion, and may also be applied to the study of Shin Buddhism. Needless to say, it should be remembered that what Smart defines as “social dimension” is the general feature of religion, and that the various aspects of religion may
consistently overlap each other. Thus, it is possible to detect experiential or motivational aspects in Shin Buddhism, as is the case with shinjin, the fundamental experience of faith; institutions and groups, such as the different branches of Shin Buddhism and various associations of nenbutsu practitioners and activists; narrative and doctrinal elements, which mainly relate to the Shin Buddhist scriptures and their interpretation; the ethical aspect, which is problematical in the Shin Buddhist context because of the teaching of tariki, but can nonetheless be clearly recognized in various instances, such as passages of Shinran’s Letters, and the present-day emphasis on peace and non-violence by the Shin Buddhist institutions; a ritual aspect, which is well exemplified by the practice of the nenbutsu and by the gongyō, the daily religious service in front of the home altar (butsudan); and a material aspect, which pertains to temples, statues, scrolls, home Buddhist altars, and so forth.

As for the overlap of different aspects, we may notice that the ethical aspect in Shin Buddhism is linked to the experiential aspect, because of the centrality of shinjin for the ethical life of the believers. Moreover, it closely relates to Shin Buddhist institutions and other groups of nenbutsu practitioners, and to their effort to rethink past war responsibilities and condemn violence. It also emerges from the core of Shin Buddhist sacred narrative and doctrines, such as in the case of the expression “no need for soldiers or weapons” (hyōga muyō) found in the Muryōjukyō or Shinran’s words “Do not take a liking to poison just because there is an antidote” reported by Yuien-bō in a famous passage of the Tannishō. And it also may be embodied in rituals, as is exemplified by the memorials for the war dead held by the Hongwanji-ha (Zensenbotsusha tsuitō hōyō) and the Ōtani-ha (Zensenbotsusha tsuichō hōe), which have become occasions to promote a peaceful and pluralistic society.

From the abovementioned observations, it may be seen that Religious Studies approaches Shin Buddhism from different perspectives, which may imply the use of historical analysis and the methods of the social sciences. What distinguishes Religious Studies from other disciplines such as History, Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology is its exclusive focus on the study of religious phenomena, which is pursued through an interdisciplinary approach.
Understanding and Cooperation

One criticism of Religious Studies, which is not unheard of among Shin Buddhist practitioners, is that non-believers cannot understand the real meaning of Shin Buddhism. It is interesting to note that if this premise is fully accepted, then one should conclude that only Buddhists can really understand Buddhism, only Christians can understand Christianity, only Muslims can understand Islam, and so forth. In the best case, perhaps, some form of interfaith dialogue would be possible. One example of this attitude is the case of a Shin Buddhist practitioner who, during a conference of the IASBS, strongly criticized those scholars who claim to study the Buddhist scriptures in a “scientific” (objective) way, since they cannot penetrate the spiritual depth, or “the religious truths” of those texts. A solid argument against this criticism is that Religious Studies has nothing to say about the “truth” of Shin Buddhism, and religion in general, because this is by no means an object of study. Religious Studies is about “facts,” not about “truths.” On the other hand, however, the fact that religion can be a very serious factor in the life of nenbutsu practitioners is taken for granted as a preliminary step for the research.

It should be added, however, that such a respectful attitude toward the religious life of Shin Buddhist practitioners does not mean that Religious Studies is used to justify or to uncritically accept whatever one says about one’s own religion. The main reason for this is because the task of Religious Studies is to increase the general knowledge of religions and to provide correct information about them to the general public. Therefore, Religious Studies also analyzes the information about religion that is provided by the believers themselves. It may also be observed that sometimes religious concern can be an obstacle to looking critically at certain aspects of one’s religious experience and practice. Moreover, as the study of history shows, the representations that religions make for themselves may have propagandistic overtones and imply hidden political agendas. In other words, the pursuit of secular interests or pressure from other spheres of social life can induce religions to present deformed and inconsistent views of themselves. One may think here of the deletion of passages from the Shin Buddhist scriptures under government pressure during the war, and more in general of the war responsibility issue within the Shin Buddhist religious community, which has been addressed so earnestly in recent times. However, we should not forget that
the ongoing deep rethinking of past war cooperation, which is taking place within the Shin Buddhist religious community after such a relatively short (“institutional”) time, is a rare and fortunate case worldwide. In most cases, religions continue to be critically unaware or even indifferent to the consequences of their own past or present attitudes toward society and the political sphere. Therefore, the critical analysis of these misrepresentations and contradictions in order to provide correct information (also while events are actually taking place) to the academic community and the general public stands as a continual task for Religious Studies, and other disciplines such as History, Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology that pursue the objective study of religious phenomena as a sub-discipline.

There is, however, an even more important way through which Religious Studies provides correct information about religions to the general public. That is to say, it may serve as an antidote to the shortcomings of mainstream media communication about religion in contemporary society. Nowadays, information about religion is generally provided through the media by non-specialists, and often this information is incorrect, biased, and used as a means of political propaganda. In the case of Shin Buddhism, and more in general of Japanese Buddhism, this factor can be seen at work in the frequent description of Buddhism as “corrupt,” “old fashioned,” and concerned only with funerals, which does not necessarily correspond to factual reality. It may be seen, therefore, that the critical approach of Religious Studies is all the more desirable in this situation, since it can help correct false notions and prejudices about religion. It should be made clear, however, that being critical in Religious Studies does not mean that the researcher makes value statements. For Religious Studies, religions are neither good nor bad. On the contrary, this critical approach aims at investigating the internal coherence of the religious phenomena being studied and their multifaceted relations to social life.

From the discussion above, then, it may be seen that Religious Studies can also provide to each religion, including Shin Buddhism, reliable information on other religions, which may be used, for example, to enhance reciprocal understanding.

On the other hand, however, the contribution of Shinshūgaku and Bukkyōgaku to Religious Studies must be fully acknowledged. This contribution mainly consists of the fact that Shinshūgaku and Bukkyōgaku continually offer to Religious Studies precious information and insights
on the classification and interpretation of texts, hidden meanings and internal relationships, genealogies, technical terms, and so forth. Incidentally, it may be added that Shin Buddhism occupies a very special role in this respect, not only because of its general emphasis on education and learning, but also for having heavily influenced the tradition of Buddhist textual studies in Japan through the scholarship of prominent figures such as Nanjō Bun’yū 南条文雄 (1849–1927), Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎 (1866-1945), and Murakami Senshō 村上専精 (1851–1929).

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning another distinctive aspect that is related to both Religious Studies and Shin Buddhism, the ongoing controversial discussions on postmodernism. One typical criticism raised against Religious Studies as a secular enterprise by proponents of postmodernism is that objectivity is not achievable, because all views rest on relative foundations. This argument has been occasionally used by Christian scholars in order to criticize the standpoint of the social sciences and to delegitimize Religious Studies, which is from their viewpoint a “non-Christian” and dangerous point of view. A solid argument against this criticism (which is also an attempt to re-theologize Religious Studies) is that we will always need a set of interpretative tools to analyze whatever phenomenon that we come across. For practical reasons, we are compelled to choose a theory in any context and some views may simply be better than others. If the results of the research are publicly testable and falsifiable, theories that are no longer useful as interpretative tools can then be substituted for by better ones. Needless to say, this also applies to the theories and explanations presented in this article.

Within Shin Buddhism, there have been some discussions about postmodernism, but one can hardly find any attempt to direct similar criticisms against the possibility of a secular approach to the study of Shin Buddhism. On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that there have been instances of postmodernist discourses used in the Shin Buddhist context in order to deconstruct a demythologized understanding of the Pure Land. Thus, one can see that the extreme application of postmodernist views on “relative foundations” can be directed to both the delegitimation of Religious Studies as the objective study of religious phenomena, and the very foundations of modern Shinshūgaku.

At present, it is difficult to envision whether such postmodernist views will pose a serious challenge to Shin Buddhist doctrinal studies in the future. What may be stated with a certain confidence, however, is
that Shin Buddhism, with its long history of doctrinal studies in a pluralistic context, does have the capacity to establish a positive relationship with Religious Studies as the secular study of religious phenomena. This requires, of course, the full acknowledgment of one another’s peculiarities, different standpoints, and aims. And, as suggested in the discussion above, this mutual acknowledgement seems to carry not only the potential for a diversification, but also for a considerable enrichment of the academic study of Shin Buddhism.
NOTES


8. It is barely necessary to recall here the strong contribution given by the social sciences to the study of religious phenomena through the work of scholars such as Émile Durkheim (1853–1917), Max Weber (1864–1920), Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955).


12. To some extent, this observation also applies to forms of Nichiren Buddhism and to some New Religious Movements.


