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Kagaku de shūkyō ga kaime dekiruka: Shinka seibutsugaku, ninchi kagaku ni motozuku shūkyō riron no tanjō 科学で宗教が解明できるか—進化生物学・認知科学に基づく宗教理論の誕生 [Can Science Explain Religion? The Development of Theories of Religion and Religious Ideas Based on Biology and Cognitive Science]. Keisō Shobō, 2023.



Synopsis by the Author

THIS STUDY examines “scientific theories of religion,” which are theories that draw upon findings from biology and cognitive science. In the twenty-first century, numerous works seeking to elucidate religion from a scientific perspective have emerged. This emergence is underpinned by recent findings in the field of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) and related disciplines.

To date, few studies in Japan have engaged with scientific theories of religion. The reasons for this dearth of research are twofold: (1) the development of various fields contributing to the establishment of scientific theories of religion is not fully understood, and (2) even when scientific theories of religion are understandable, their intellectual foundations and methodological approaches differ significantly from those of traditional research, making them difficult for many scholars to accept.

This study aims to elucidate the theoretical, social, and religious implications of the emergence of scientific theories of religion in the field of religious studies. To this end, the study elucidates the development of various fields that contributed to the establishment of scientific theories of religion (chapters 2 and 3), explores the intellectual foundations of such theories alongside existing research, identifies points of conflict between scientific theories and traditional theories (chapters 1 and 4), and examines the impact of scientific theories of religion on different religious ideas (chapters 5 and 6).

Chapter 1 analyzes the state of religious studies in Japan and North America since the end of the twentieth century to clarify how scientific theories of religion emerged. While the works of Mircea Eliade significantly influenced religious studies in both regions, criticism of his ideas began in the 1980s, leading to a controversy regarding the principles of religious studies. During this controversy, two groups of scholars emerged: modernists, who argue that only science provides objective knowledge, and postmodernists, who believe that any study reflects the sociopolitical conditions of those engaged in it. In North America, both groups have engaged in discourse, whereas in Japan, postmodern studies have predominantly gained acceptance. This disparity can be attributed to the insufficient understanding and application of scientific theories of religion in the Japanese context.

In chapter 2, I discuss the development of scientific theories of religion based on a biological perspective. Modern synthesis theory, developed in the mid-twentieth century, led to the emergence of sociobiology, as articulated by E. O. Wilson. Sociobiology has been criticized for its gene-determinism and reductionism; in response to this criticism, evolutionary psychology and cultural evolution theory have emerged. Evolutionary psychology posits that human behaviors are influenced by psychological mechanisms that evolved to address various problems, emphasizing the existence of a universal human nature. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, religion is regarded as an exceptional use of ordinary psychological mechanisms, including anthropomorphism. Conversely, cultural evolution theory focuses not on genes but rather on culture, offering models that explain cultural practices that are preferred and transmitted. This theory highlights several functions of religion, including promoting social cohesion and fostering moralistic behaviors among individuals.

In chapter 3, the theories, intellectual backgrounds, and development of CSR are discussed. CSR was developed by anthropological scholars who were interested

in cognitive science. Pioneering scholars such as E. Thomas Lawson, Robert N. McCauley, Pascal Boyer, and Harvey Whitehouse proposed cognitive theories and conducted psychological experiments to test these theories, laying the foundation for CSR. This framework posits that the universal cognitive capacities of humans contribute to the emergence of religious phenomena, aligning themselves with the perspective of evolutionary psychology.

In chapter 4, I analyze critiques of the scientific theories of religion while considering three dualistic issues: universalism versus individualism, explanation versus interpretation (understanding), and reductionism versus antireductionism. On the one hand, CSR and evolutionary theories of religion have been substantially criticized for their universalistic, explanatory approaches and reductionist tendencies. On the other hand, CSR proponents argue that any inquiry that neglects these perspectives is fundamentally flawed. Additionally, I examine the concepts of science and religion employed in these critiques, along with their relevance to existing theories.

In the final two chapters, I elucidate the relationship between scientific theories of religion and religious ideas, emphasizing that scientific theories are situated within specific sociopolitical contexts that interact with religious ideas. In chapter 5, I examine how scientific theories of religion can substantiate antireligious views. Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett assert that the advancement of evolutionary biology provides a foundation for critiquing and rejecting religious beliefs. Although their perspective is sometimes characterized as atheistic, the “religious naturalism” framework offers a positive evaluation of such scientific ideologies. This perspective posits that science and the natural world can serve as sources of various values and fulfill religious functions. Religious naturalism views nature as an object of reverence, interpreting evolutionary narratives as having mythological significance. Religious naturalism demonstrates the possibility of a religion grounded in a scientific system of values.

However, several scholars argue that scientific development does not necessarily lead to the criticism of religion. In chapter 6, I address discourses that indicate that scientific development may positively influence religion. Within religious studies, investigations related to various religious phenomena are often termed “theological”; scholars have noted that such studies may legitimize religious authority and engender social or political issues. From this perspective, the scientific examination of religion includes numerous theological studies, such as those related to neurotheology and certain branches of North American psychology. These studies share a common characteristic: they do not attempt to validate the truth of specific religious beliefs as traditional natural theology does; instead, they seek to elucidate the secular benefits of religious belief using scientific methodologies. We may refer to such an approach as the “natural theology of utility.” The emergence of such studies can be regarded as a social or political consequence of the scientific theories of religion.

In conclusion, the following observations may be proposed:

(1) With the emergence of scientific theories of religion, three traditional boundaries have begun to blur: boundaries between the animal and the human, the material and the immaterial, and the natural sciences and social sciences or humanities.

(2) Scientific theories of religion hold three types of significance. Their theoretical significance challenges existing positions on universalism versus individualism, explanation versus interpretation (understanding), and reductionism versus antireductionism. Their social significance pertains to normative arguments on religion, although there is no consensus on a singular viewpoint. Finally, their religious significance involves the formulation of religious ideas, such as religious naturalism or the natural theology of utility.

(3) Regarding the concepts of science and religion, science encompasses many diverse perspectives and is difficult to define; however, the strategic application of science in critiquing scientific or unscientific studies can be said to possess an ideological dimension. Religion is a concept that is formed primarily in conjunction with theory, but when it is used, it is always accompanied by interaction with society.

(4) Considering these findings, three avenues for further research can be proposed: research grounded in the scientific theories of religion, theoretical investigations and methodological discourse, and studies focusing on science itself. By broadening our perspective to include new research subjects and methodologies and simultaneously critically analyzing them, we can significantly enhance the potential of research in the future. This study aims to highlight this opportunity.

Statement from the Awards Committee

This book examines recent trends in religious studies—particularly in Europe and North America—that draw on insights from the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology and cognitive science. More specifically, it addresses the following topics: the links between religious theories grounded in evolutionary biology and cognitive science developed by modernist successors after critiques of Mircea Eliade (chapter 1); religious theories rooted in sociobiology influenced by evolutionary theory and evolutionary biology (chapter 2); the emergence of the cognitive science of religion (hereafter CSR) stemming from anthropology and other fields advocating a scientific approach (chapter 3); various debates within scientific theories of religion, such as universalism vs. particularism, explanation vs. interpretation, and reductionism vs. antireductionism (chapter 4); anti-religious thought in naturalistic scientific theories of religion, such as Richard Dawkins's work and the so-called debunking argument (chapter 5); and religious ideas that coexist with science, as seen in the works of Stephen Jay Gould, Andrew Newberg, and CSR itself (chapter 6).

The scope of this discussion extends beyond the simple “science vs. religion” framework, encompassing the social and political contexts that shape religion and prompt questions about its privileged status. It also examines the social context

surrounding scientific perspectives, which seem to explain religion by identifying its origins. Here, the author references psychological and medical discourses that attempt to rationalize religion from a scientific standpoint, as well as the ideological nature of anti-religious scientific thought. Another notable feature of this book is that it deals with CSR—an area with relatively few researchers in Japan—while including bibliographic suggestions and explaining terminology to help readers less familiar with the field.

This book deserves commendation for several reasons. First, it is an ambitious project that seeks to underscore the significance and potential of CSR within the field of religious studies in Japan. Given the limited body of previous research available in Japanese, the author's effort to situate cognitive approaches to religion within the broader historical trajectory of religious studies in Europe and North America—supported by a comprehensive literature review—demonstrates both the international outlook and theoretical inquisitiveness that can inspire emerging scholars in the discipline. Second, rather than simply endorsing or rejecting scientific theories of religion from a single viewpoint, the book aims for a thorough understanding of these theories by examining their methodologies, ideologies, and social transformations from multiple perspectives. In doing so, it comprehensively engages with the work and commentary of key figures in Europe and North America, providing a clear overview of current trends and challenges in cognitive approaches to religion. It thus serves as the first introductory text on CSR in Japan.

On the other hand, this book also has a few notable problems. First, because it primarily offers an overview, the depth of its discussion is sometimes in question. There is little indication that the author delves into specific religious phenomena, leaving the exploration of European and North American debates at a somewhat introductory level. Consequently, the book does not fully advance the author's own methodological or theoretical perspectives. Second, to expand this field in Japan, the author would need to devote more attention to Japan's current position, rather than merely introducing Western theories. The book does not analyze why CSR fulfills certain needs for Western researchers but not for researchers in Japan. Further investigation is also called for regarding how the “scientific method,” which can be traced back to proof of God's existence in Europe, connects with the attempt to identify the “causes” of religion through scientific insights—especially its relationship to the “natural theology of utility.” If the author intends to establish a uniquely Japanese approach to CSR, the next step would be to provide original interpretations and analyses within the context of Japanese religious studies—an undertaking not yet addressed in this introductory volume. Third, as a humanities-oriented work, the book does not sufficiently explore the exact meaning of “scientific” in “scientific theories.” For example, in discussing neuroscientific, reductionist explanations of religious belief, the author merely categorizes the naturalization of mental phenomena in the philosophy of mind as a method distinct from CSR, without assessing the foundation of its validity. Unless the author clarifies his stance on scientific

language—purportedly free of ideology and directly linked to observation and reproducibility—it is difficult to claim that this work offers a conclusive response to the question posed in its title: “Can Science Explain Religion?” Although the author does acknowledge the impossibility of a simple dichotomy between “explanation” as the domain of natural science and “understanding” as that of everything else, the balance between “explanation” and “understanding” depends on the type of scientific discourse, which makes the examination of individual cases crucial to fully grasp scientific explanation. In science and religion alike, discourse cannot escape ideological constraints—a phenomenon already widely discussed in the framework of theory-ladenness. This book ultimately remains within the scope of such scientific critiques and does not venture beyond them.

Despite these issues, this book is an ambitious endeavor that lays out the fundamental research trends in CSR and other scientific approaches to religion, fully showcasing the author’s scholarly abilities. Considering this, the Selection Committee has deemed this work a suitable recipient of the 2024 Japanese Association for Religious Studies Award.