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Women's "Experience" in New Religious Movements The Case of Shinnyoen

While preaching a doctrine of sexual equality, many new religious movements in fact place women in a subordinate position. Previous research on these movements has claimed that it is women themselves who support the structures of male-dominance and has been critical of the women as being backward. In this article I point out that such research paints women as a peculiar, problematic existence. Ironically, this has averted attention from the process by which women's experience is erased as the group develops, and has hindered efforts to make a true record of the role of women in religious history. I focus on Shinnyoen as a case where traditional gender ideology does not lead to the exclusion of women's religious experience. The group has chosen to emphasize individual spiritual development, while at the same time preserving traditional doctrines and practices, and as a result it has established an environment where gender categories are not fixed. This suggests the possibility that "spirituality" might restrain the tendency towards conservatism in gender structures.

KEYWORDS: spirituality – new religious movements – gender ideology – women's religious leadership – Shinnyoen

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IT HAS ALREADY been some time since sexual discrimination in traditional religions has become apparent to all, and feminist discourse has highlighted the role of religion in justifying the ideology of sexual discrimination. In the case of new religious movements, however, women have often played a role in their founding and have been active as preachers. To the extent that the organizational structure of these movements is still rather fluid, women have been valued for their enthusiasm and desire, and they have had considerable influence on drawing their neighbors, families, and friends to these movements.

At the end of the day, however, we have not seen the kind of fundamental change in the status and role of women in new religious movements that one might expect. As researchers have pointed out previously, although doctrines might extol sexual equality, women are in fact placed subordinate to their husbands and male religious leaders, perhaps because many new religious movements are based on older religious traditions and thus inherit and reflect their value systems. The status of women in new religious movements continues to reflect the contradictions seen in traditional religious groups. Feminist research in various fields has pointed out how women's experience has been erased from history's stage. Likewise, religious research has helped to excavate the traces left by women in the various religious traditions. That these had not previously been brought to light is the fault of those researchers who have failed to draw attention to them.

The absence, or subordination, of women in narratives of the rise of civilizations and cultures; the particularity of women's experience as opposed to the universality of men's experience; the confinement of women to research on the domestic and the private; prioritizing one subject as more important than other subjects—all of this has occurred as a result of academic politics (SCOTT 1988, p. 9). When we speak of research from a feminist perspective, we must not forget that women have been erased from history for a second time by this intellectual enterprise called research.

For that reason, in pursuing research on new religious movements from a feminist perspective, we have no choice but to attempt a "rereading, reconceiving, and reconstructing" of women's activities in these movements, as proposed by June O'CONNOR (1989). If in that process we overly differentiate these movements from other religious groups and remove them from their historical roots, making some kind of conclusive evaluation about them, then we are in danger of

losing sight of the problem. Rather, we need to return them to their historical roots, and for that purpose we need to examine our methodology.

Discourse on Gender and Authority in Research on New Religious Movements

J. L. JACOBS (2001) classifies research on contemporary religious movements from a feminist perspective according to the following three categories:

1. An examination of gender roles in religious groups, exploring the relationship between gender and patriarchal traditional religions, which is, of course, critical of persistent patriarchal structures.
2. An examination of groups where women have an opportunity to undertake positions of authority, although gender roles might still be somewhat fixed, in an attempt to differentiate these groups from traditional religion and find some hope for the future.
3. Research into goddess and other women-centered spirituality movements to explore the possibilities of the feminist spirit actualized in a religious movement; this research is itself seen as feminist practice.

In Japan, movements from the Meiji Period are included among the new religions, and thus many of these movements have already accumulated a considerable history. For that reason it is questionable whether Jacobs' categories, based on recent Western research, can be applied to the situation in Japan. If we were to try to apply it to Japan, however, we could say that research on women in new religious movements here is limited to the first two categories. In the first category the conservative nature of the gender structure is clear and so the position of the researcher is also clear, whereas in the second category it is difficult to make judgments in the face of the ambivalent reality and thus the perspective and position of the researcher is called into question.

In this paper I intend first to examine critically previous research methodologies and outlooks, and then later focus on a new religious movement that has attracted attention recently as offering a new approach, examining how women's experience has been taken up in the group and what position this experience has been given in the history of the group.

New religious movements in Japan have produced a number of women in leadership positions. There is considerable discourse that places a high value on the role of women, and the innovative nature of this development has been appreciated from early on. With the introduction of a feminist perspective, however, previous optimistic appraisals have retreated, and views such as the following have become standard:

When the spiritual qualities of these exceptional women (women founders) are brought to bear on other women, however, contrary to what we might expect they are limited to a ratification of common, established morality.... A

reality of inequality has been concealed under the guise of a doctrine of religious equality. (ÖGOSHI 1997, p. 158)

Why is it that while producing women leaders new religious movements have retained the practice of sexual discrimination? Here I would like to examine one attempt to answer that question, an argument presented by Igeta Midori. Of course, there have been other attempts at an answer, but Igeta's perspective is considered to be typical of research on women in new religions in Japan.

Igeta describes new religious movements as “salvation mechanisms or therapy cultures to overcome the situation of political and economic crisis that accompanied the process of modernization” (IGETA 1992, p. 187). Regarding their view of gender roles, she sees this as a system of truth dependent on the volition of common women to subjectively accept their status as women. As an example she offers Helen Hardacre's research on Reiyūkai 霊友会.

Reiyūkai, founded in 1930 with Kubo Kakutarō 久保角太郎 as chairman and his sister-in-law Kotani Kimi 小谷喜美 as president, is representative of new religious movements in Japan. In Reiyūkai, Kubo's beliefs concerning ancestor veneration based on the *Lotus Sutra* are combined with communication with the spirit world through Kotani's psychic powers, providing the individual with a new way to offer prayers for all related ancestor spirits, and the group expanded quickly during the war and in the postwar years.

Hardacre points out that the concern of Reiyūkai members focuses on the collapse of family structures, and that they aim for a revival of the *ie* 家 (extended household) ethic as opposed to the nuclear family (HARDACRE 1984). In an attempt to revive and support the family structure, the women believers perform the rites of ancestor veneration and observe faithfully the traditional family ethic. This is described as an attitude of not trying to have the other change in order to adapt to oneself, but rather first changing one's own mind, one's own way of relating to others (also called “deferring” to others). For women this means especially “deferring to one's husband,” and the religious practice of apologizing to one's husband for not fulfilling one's duties as a wife is recommended.

HARDACRE calls this method of problem solving “strategies of weakness” (1984, pp. 208–21), that is, strategies whereby those of inferior status (here meaning those without economic power) create a situation advantageous to themselves. Wives who are economically dependent on their husbands—in an inferior, subordinate position—use the authority of the doctrine of the group as a means to justify their economic dependence on their husbands, but at the same time make their husbands and children emotionally dependent on themselves, and as a result acquire the power to control them. In line with this analysis, Igeta claims that women become a “subordinated self within the truth

system that sanctifies the norm of a sexual division of labor," and give themselves authority as wives.¹

We can see the influence of deprivation theory in this perspective that describes the faith of women in Reiyūkai as a "logic of the weak," or "subordinated self." That is, it depends on the logic that those who feel they are in a disadvantageous position because of an awareness of being deprived compared to other individuals or groups, or compared to one's own desires, tend to turn to religion.

Glock describes five types of deprivation (economic, social, organic, moral, psychological) and argues that while these deprivations lead people to religion, at the same time religious movements emerge as strategies to resolve or respond to people's feelings of deprivation (GLOCK and STARK 1965). According to this theory, people (in this case women) participate in new religious movements in order to overturn the status quo. The theory that women are motivated to join new religious movements by the desire to obtain some compensation for the authority that eludes them in the present social system is found not only in Japan but has become a stock phrase in research on new religious movements more generally.² We need to ask, however, for whom is the interpretation that women participate in new religious movements in order to make up for some perceived deprivation satisfactory in the first place?

A presupposition of deprivation theory is that new religious movements are different from traditional religions. One difference is the motivation for joining—genuine faith is assumed in the case of traditional religions, whereas for new religious movements social unrest is given as the reason. Also, in the case of new religious movements the presupposition is that they offer empowerment to women as women, and the difference from men is taken for granted. As a result, women are seen as a special entity in modern society, dealing with some kind of "problem." As portrayed by Hardacre, Igeta, and others, men stand independent and enjoy the use of authority, while women in new religious movements are in the uncertain position of constantly searching for their identity.

Since religions emerge and develop in the midst of various social factors, of course we cannot deny that there is some relationship to social change in the emergence of these movements. In demonstrating that doctrines develop in response to social demands it is necessary to dismantle sexual essentialism. It is also a fact that many women do find themselves in situations where they have little or no authority. In addition, Reiyūkai does in fact have a doctrine specifically for women, and many women have found salvation by accepting it.

1. IGETA 1992, p. 202. The same analysis can be found in IGETA 1993.

2. See, for example, STARK and BAINBRIDGE 1985, p. 414.

To reach the conclusion, however, that women's faith is "an effort to obtain power and authority over husband and children by devoting oneself to, that is, sanctifying, the role of wife, entangled with the maternal myth,"³ amounts to the same thing as taking the denomination's male-centered view that limits women to roles within the family. The attempt to make women visible by focusing on their "subjectivity" at the same time fixes women as different. It emphasizes just how peculiar women are. In fact, what is this kind analysis trying to make clear, and why does it come to this conclusion? Those are the questions that need to be asked.

From a feminist perspective the problem becomes why women's activities in the early period of the group are erased from its history once the movement gains a following and a new system is established. In Reiyūkai, at the stage before the observance of the family ethic and distinct women's roles were emphasized, a different form of religious practice for women existed. Beginning with Kimi, many women believers assured a connection with the ancestors through the use of psychic powers, and this became the basis for Reiyūkai's unique form of ancestor worship.⁴

Igeta describes her article as, "one part of an effort to approach a comprehensive view of religious culture in modern Japan, by constructing a platform from which to view what kind of meaning women have found, and find, in religion, from the point of view of the social relationships of men and women" (IGETA 1992, p. 188). In her conclusion she generalizes regarding women in new religious movements, saying:

If we take women, who in fact are the backbone of new religious movements in Japan, as an active subject, then these movements can be seen as women's consciousness-raising movements within the modernization process of society in general, although they grew in the opposite direction to that developed by the feminist movement. (IGETA 1992, p. 213)

Reiyūkai is one of the larger new religions, and its influence is considerable. There are, however, a great variety of new religious movements in Japan, as well as a considerable variety of women's faith styles. It is much too early to make the generalization that the meaning found by women in religion can be described in this way.

Finally, one must not forget that Igeta's article does not present the actual voices of women believers. Hardacre, who herself conducted fieldwork, is highly critical of much research on new religious movements that is not based

3. IGETA 1992, p. 198. This expression leads one to the conviction that the opponent to be confronted by feminist studies is not just the male-centered perspective but also misogyny, wherever it is found.

4. The situation in early Reiyūkai is described in SHIMAZONO 1988.

on fieldwork and instead limits itself to presenting impressions (HARDACRE 1984, pp. 224–27). This is an especially important point regarding women in new religious movements, who are often unilaterally described and evaluated by others.

Women and Spirituality

What really needs to be considered is the large number of women who participate in religion in general—whether they be new or traditional groups. Is there some social factor that can explain the high percentage of women believers in practically every religious movement? Although we cannot deny the influence of social change, are we not missing something by attributing everything to this one factor?

The reason why I raised the question of psychic powers and spirit-experiences above is because I believe the fact that there have been many “shamans” and “spiritual mediums” among the founders of new religious movements should be a central concern of research on women in religion. It is the repeated appearance of notions of psychic or sacred powers that has played an important role in opening the way for women to exercise leadership in religious movements, including new religious movements.

It goes without saying, as others have pointed out, that although women have been excluded from sacred places and holy orders, they have been dominant in spiritual matters.⁵ In overemphasizing the spiritual powers of women there is the danger of falling into the traditional view of gender roles that attributes reason, or *logos*, to men and spiritual powers to women, an essentialism that I have no intention of championing here. Spiritual powers are not limited to women, and neither do all women possess this power. There are also many and various ways of conceiving the spiritual realm.

It is also clear, however, that many women have experienced such sacred powers, and have been the medium of spirit-expression. The problem arises when such experiences are identified with physiological phenomena such as pregnancy and birth and, in comparison with reason, are looked down upon, and thus are, in fact, excluded from authority.

As was stated previously, research on women in new religious movements in Japan has tended to focus on this kind of gender role, leading to a situation where sufficient thought has not been given to the meaning of women's religious experience. For that reason we have been unable to grasp the various trends in the relationship of women and religion. In order to leave some historical account of women's religious activities we need to analyze their experiences and evaluate their worth properly.

5. See, for example, YANAGITA 1990.

“Spirituality” is a term that is easily misunderstood, and so there is some danger in using it (KING 1993). By the use of this term I do not intend to try and prove that women have experiences or an essential nature different from that of men. Instead, I want to use it as a concept that helps us see the real individual experience that cannot be contained in the set ideas of “women’s essential nature” proposed by established religions. It is a strategic concept that will help us to break out of the category of “women” altogether in order to realize the vision of an equal society.

In order to grasp the view of gender in new religious movements, Elizabeth PUTTICK has classified the members’ desires and values, based on Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” model, according to the following five categories: survival, safety, esteem, belongingness and love, and self-actualization (1999, p. 159). Furthermore, she classifies the first two levels as “traditionalism” and the latter three as “personal development,” and tries to grasp the view of gender in these new movements as distinct from that which previously existed.

New religious movements that focus on personal development—from simple self-improvement to spirituality—especially place an emphasis on the values of self-expression, exploration, and empowerment. Views of gender in these types of groups are fluid and flexible, giving women an equal chance and the possibility to relate work, marriage, and motherhood to spiritual growth. Puttick points out that women can also easily attain positions of leadership in these groups. Jacobs’ third category, introduced above, also corresponds to these developments.

In religious movements that have developed or achieved some measure of growth in Japan since the mid-1970s and 1980s (sometimes called new new religions) the tendency towards categories three to five is particularly strong.⁶ In contrast to the West, however—where new spirituality movements tend to be quite distinct from dominant traditional religions, favor oriental and other foreign religions, and often take the form of networks—in Japan there is less opposition to traditional religion, as well as more continuity regarding soteriology and organizational structure. What about gender structures? Have these new movements been able to overcome normative views of gender? We need to examine Puttick’s claim here.

In this article I will focus on Shinnyoen, a Buddhist-based new religious movement, to examine faith and gender in a new religious group that aims for individual self transformation. Although founded in the prewar period, Shinnyoen achieved most of its growth in the period since the mid-1970s, a time characterized by the end of rapid economic development and the shift to a “prosperous

6. In addition to Shinnyoen, Sūkyō Mahikari, GLA, Byakkō Shinkōkai, Kōfuku no Kagaku, and others would be included in this category. See SHIMAZONO 2002.

society" in Japan.⁷ According to the official statistics offered by the Cultural Agency of the Japanese central government, Shinnyoen presently has 796,477 believers, with thirty-two domestic and eighteen overseas branches, as well as three mission stations (BUNKACHŌ 2002).

SHŌJUIN—THE INHERITOR AND SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL POWERS

Let us first consider Itō Tomoji 伊藤友司 (1912–1967), who holds the status of "spiritual founder" (*reiso* 靈祖) and is revered as Shōjuin (撰受院). Following the death of her father, Shōjuin was raised, along with her sister, by her grandmother in Yamanashi Prefecture. At the age of twenty-one she married her second cousin, Itō Shinjō 伊藤真乘 (1906–1989, previous name Fumiaki 文明), and they established a home in Tachikawa. Shinjō, while working as an engineer for an airplane construction company, would also help those who came seeking advice through the use of *kōyōryū byōzeishō* 甲陽流病筮, a type of divination passed down within his family, and in 1935 he decided to devote himself to religious activities.

At the time when he enshrined Dainichi Daishō Fudō Myōō 大日本大聖不動明王 in his home, Tomoji felt the movement of the spirits and decided to devote herself to religion as well. The two of them engaged in winter austerities, at the end of which, on 4 February, Shōjuin fell into a deep trance. Her aunt happened to be there at the time, and when she saw Shōjuin in the trance state with the sign of the lotus over her head, she sat facing Shōjuin and said, "Seek the esoteric rather than exoteric, train yourself correctly, and follow the way for the sake of others." In this way she inherited spiritual powers from her aunt.

These spiritual powers were originally something that her aunt had inherited from Tomoji's grandmother. Her grandmother was a *Lotus Sutra* practitioner, who would engage in healing activities through the exorcism of spirits, such as foxes (*kitsune* 狐). After inheriting these spiritual powers her aunt is said to have also engaged in exorcisms in Yokohama. Women with spiritual powers such as these were not unusual in local Japanese society. Shōjuin determined that it was her "karma" to engage in religious activities, and Shinjō was amazed at Tomoji's abilities.

In 1938 Shinchō-ji 真澄寺 was established at the site of the present headquarters of Shinnyoen, and the name Shingonshū Daigoha Tachikawa Fudōson

7. For the history and activities of Shinnyoen I rely on SAKURAI 2001, HIROTA 1990, and YAMAGUCHI 1987. I have also consulted Shinnyoen's own publications. The following articles have also been helpful: SHIRAMIZU 1978, HASHIMOTO 1995, KAWABATA 1995, AKIBA 1995, NUMATA 1995, and ALAM 1994.

In addition, I have been engaged in field research of Shinnyoen since 1996, and from the interviews obtained from my research I will present the accounts of three women here. USUI 2002 also presents an analysis of gender roles in Shinnyoen.

Kyōkai 真言宗醍醐派立川不動尊教会 was adopted for the group. Shōjuin would use her spiritual powers, and Shinjō his divination to help those who came asking for advice with their problems. Shōjuin’s powers were especially strong, and she was able to save many suffering from fox-possession through her mediumship. Furthermore, through prayer Shinjō was able to interpret the meaning of the spirit revelations that Shōjuin would receive, a practice that became the foundation of *sesshin shugyō* 接心修行, the central practice of Shinnyoen.

Soon after they began these religious practices, however, their older son died at the age of three. The esoteric words—given by Fudō Myōō—uttered by Shōjuin as her son died, words that contain the power to save, are still chanted by the group as the *goreiju* ご霊咒. One hundred days after the death, Shōjuin was inspired by the spirit of her son, and after that, since a path between the spirit world and this world had been cleared, it is said that she would fall into a trance more quickly.

While Shōjuin’s spiritual powers were getting stronger and stronger, Shinjō sought connections with established religious traditions, and in 1941 he completed training at Daigo-ji, the headquarter temple of Shingonshū Daigo-ha in Kyoto.

In 1948 the two of them established Makoto Kyōdan まこと教団, and Shōjuin devoted herself to teaching the believers. In January 1950 Shōjuin began spiritual training under the direction of Shinjō, and received the transmission of *Shinnyo hōryū* 真如法流. As the “first disciple” of Shinjō she was given the religious name Itō Shinnyo 伊藤真如 by her husband. In this way Tomoji was given the qualification to perform all of the clerical ceremonies. Following a court case brought by a former disciple, the so-called Makoto Kyōdan Affair, the name of the group was changed to Shinnyoen, and in 1953 it was registered as a religious corporation with that name. After retiring as the head priest Shinjō was given the title of Kyōshu 教主, and Shōjuin became the official representative of the group.

Shinjō chose the *Nirvana Sutra* (*Daihatsu Nehankyō* 大般涅槃經) as the chief scripture.⁸ It is said that the *Nirvana Sutra* was the final teaching of the Buddha, where he reveals the truths about nirvana. Shinjō sought a discourse within the Buddhist canon that could support Shinnyoen’s view of the spirit world, and declared that the practice of *sesshin* in Shinnyoen was “the path of Oneness” (*ichinyo no michi* 一如の道), a way for people to attain the state of enlightenment of esoteric Buddhism in their daily life. With this he parted ways with Shingonshū and set off on his own path as the leader of a lay Buddhist movement.

8. Regarding the *Nirvana Sutra*, Shinjō explains that it is “the supreme scripture that promises that all people, regardless of sex, can become saints, based on Mahayana teaching.”

In 1952, their younger son died at the age of fifteen. From then on, both sons were regarded as saviors in the spirit world who took upon themselves the suffering and troubles of others, and they became the source of the power of the spirit mediums, through the mediumship of Shōjuin. This direct, concrete soteriology led the believers to even more fervent practice of *sesshin*.

From the 1960s Shinnyoen had become very active on the religious scene in Japan, and relations with other religious groups deepened. In March 1966 Shinjō and Shōjuin were given high ranks as priests by Daigo-ji. In November of the same year they participated in a world conference of Buddhist believers in Thailand, and in June of the following year they visited eight countries in Europe as part of an official religious delegation from Japan. After returning to Japan, Shōjuin died suddenly in August of that year. It was after her death that she was given the name Shōjuin by the group.

Shōju 摂受 is used in contrast to *shakubuku* 折伏, the aggressive form of proselytization adopted by some religions in Japanese history, and it means to accept what is good in the masses and to teach them with mercy. During her trip to Europe Shōjuin felt some abnormality in her body, but no medical explanation could be given for it. It is said that as a spirit medium she received the spirits in her body, and was able to achieve spiritual harmony. In the year following her death the long-awaited practice hall was completed, and branches were established overseas, and so her death is seen as the first act in the completion of *shōju*.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN SHINNYOEN

In Shinnyoen there is also a doctrine directed at women and a certain view of gender roles. There is a dualistic view of gender applied to Shōjuin and Shinjō, "male=heaven=dharma and intelligence, female=earth=practice and training," and the two are venerated as "both parents" (*sōoya sama* 双親さま), embodying the ideal world view of male-female harmony.

Shōjuin herself held it important to serve one's husband, and often taught others to do so. *Josei ni ataeru jū-nana kun* 女性に与える十七訓 [Seventeen Lessons for Women], which summarizes Shōjuin's teaching, contains the following admonitions:

- Be ladylike.
- Don't forget that you are a woman.
- Be kind but strong.
- Don't be self-centered.
- Don't become a woman who makes others unhappy.

"A," a forty-year veteran believer (spirit medium), says,

It was only towards women that Shōjuin-sama got angry. She would say, “Your role is to serve. Women have much karma. It is women who are the foundation, and that’s why the woman’s role is so important.”⁹

Saying things like, “A good wife will sacrifice herself to serve others,” Shōjuin bought into a traditional, conservative view of the women’s role.

The teaching given to women in the kitchen—at a time when Shōjuin herself is described as “devoting herself to life as a wife and mother, quietly raising her children while persevering in practice, supporting the founder from the shadows”—are called “The Kitchen Homilies” (*okatte seppō* お勝手説法). The kitchen is the woman’s place, the place where women are instructed how to act as women. Even while Shōjuin displayed considerable spiritual power she was referred to with the term commonly used for housewife (*okusama* 奥様) and there are indications that she was seen as nothing more than an assistant to Shinjō (*Kangi Sekai* 1974, p. 65). When she was still alive, the believers had two images of Shōjuin—that of a strict spiritual director and that of a kind mother. They say that the picture of her in a white apron welcoming believers as they arrived at the headquarters building is the one that best fits her. As “B,” a believer (and spirit medium) from the early days of Shinnyoen, says,

She was always very kind in teaching us... She would tell us how to be a good mother, a good wife, that the woman’s role is to serve. We learned especially by her example. As she was pulling weeds from the garden she would say, “It is just like with our own selfishness; if you let yourself go for a week the weeds take over the place.” That’s how she would tell us to throw away our selfish ways. Even now the way I remember Shōjuin is with her apron on.¹⁰

Her spirituality also had a characteristic that can only be call feminine essentialism. For example, “A” tells us:

She used to say, “It is women who are strong, and that’s why we are able to accept men as they are. If women change their own ways rather than try to change others, then everything remains in harmony. Women are of the earth spirit, and in that way we have an accepting personality that can be a support for others.”

“B” also says,

The spiritual advice I was given when I received spiritual powers was, “Be a support for others.” I thought of Shōjuin’s teaching that we need to serve our husbands, and I decided to be a support, and that’s how I received spiritual powers.

9. From an interview held on 22 May 1998.

10. From an interview held on 24 December 1996.

Shōjuin did not, however, demand a self-effacing attitude from women only. After speaking of the role of the wife she would often add, "The same can be said for men," demanding that each individual fulfill his or her social role. She would teach that each person should undergo their own training, saying, "The husband's path has its own virtues, and likewise for the wife. Each has their own path to spiritual development." The "Seventeen Lessons for Women" also contains material not specifically directed towards women, and it is understood as providing an ideal for all believers. For example,

Put yourself in the place of the other. Always have a smile for everyone you meet. Become a person who is valued by others.

A male believer who entered Shinnyoen as a university student and is now the president of a company says,

After I graduated from university and began working for the company I always kept in mind the Seventeen Lessons. I can't begin to say how much they encouraged me and became my goal.

(SHINNYOEN KYŌGAKUBU 1985, p. 218)

Recently in Shinnyoen the spirit of *shōju* is not especially connected with femininity, but is seen as a model of activity common to all believers. In the present day, when good communication skills are seen as necessary for life in society, the *shōju* way of living, that of "accepting others and vitalizing oneself," is taken as an ideal, and this image of Shōjuin is carried on even by those who did not know her in life.

A female who works as a supervisor of education counselors recalls how the spiritual message she received in *sesshin* helped her to realize how she had been blaming others:

I realized that this teaching helps us to overcome problems that even counseling can't help. Be kind, be warm, put yourself in the place of the other, that's what taking on the spirit of Shōjuin means. (Naigai Jihō 604: 9)

A blind young pianist offered the following words of gratitude on the occasion of the European Happiness Festival in 2000. He had been frequently bullied because of his handicap and was deeply hurt, but has become more positive since entering Shinnyoen:

I found this teaching in 1996. I feel like I can hear the spirit of Shōjuin saying, 'It's time! Be brave! The time has come to fulfill your mission here on earth!' I want to give a performance where I can just feel the teaching oozing out from my body. I want to pass on this true salvation.¹¹

11. *Naigai Jihō* 604: 49. Overseas Tomoji is referred to as "Shōjuin-sama, our spiritual mother."

One possible reason why traditional female roles are both respected and at the same time extended to both sexes is that there is no Women's Division in Shinnyoen. Nearly all new religions in Japan have a Women's Division that functions as the real foundation for the group. These Women's Divisions tend to emphasize female roles, and the roles of wife and mother are taken for granted. Shinnyoen, however, has not adopted the strategy of strengthening its organization by establishing a Women's Division. Instead, a Youth Division was established early on, placing emphasis on the training of the next generation. There the ideal is to become a faithful believer and productive member of society, without distinction between the sexes (SAKURAI 2001, p. 359, note 11).

Spiritual Powers and Sesshin

According to present Shinnyoen doctrine, Shōjuin inherited “earth-spirit lineage spiritual powers” from her grandmother and aunt, Shinjō received the “heaven-spirit lineage spiritual powers” of *byōzeishō* passed down in his family from his father, both of these lineages were united, and with the addition of the powers of their two sons in the spirit world the *shinnyo* spiritual powers have been perfected. As mentioned previously, however, the role played by Shōjuin's spiritual powers was considerable.

Of course, the esoteric Shingon tradition contributed to the importance placed on spiritual powers, but we also cannot ignore gender as a factor in this process. When Shinjō decided to follow the way of a religious leader he associated with other male priests, received direction from them, was linked with the traditional authority of Daigo-ji, and was given the opportunity to train and study doctrine there. It was his status as a male that made it relatively easy for him to realize this. The only option open to Shōjuin, as also for her grandmother and aunt—all three women—was to make use of Kannon and Yakushin beliefs combined with spiritual powers. As in other traditional Buddhist sects, women had a low status in Shingon. The sect did, however, incorporate women spiritualists among its faith healers, and in that way a place was provided for Shōjuin, albeit informally. With the gender roles of women as possessing spiritual powers and men being concerned with doctrine, it is not unusual that Shōjuin's spiritual powers were subsumed under Shinjō's traditional authority.

Since Shinjō, however, acquired the qualification to start his own religious sect from Daigo-ji and in fact began an independent religious group, Shōjuin was also able to rise above the status of a traditional woman spiritualist. Skillfully combining a Buddhist worldview with spiritual powers, and making the individual's development of these spiritual powers the center of doctrine and religious practice, Shōjuin's status as a spiritual founder remains solid.

One must consider the fact that financial contributions continued to be

made to Daigo-ji even after Shinnyoen became an independent group to explain the fact that high priestly status was conferred on Shōjuin by Daigo-ji, and that a Shōju-an 撰受庵, in memory of Shōjuin, has been established on the grounds of the temple. However, that aptly expresses the difference between male-centered traditional religions and Shinnyoen, with its emphasis on the realization of the individual's spiritual powers regardless of sex.¹²

Although in its early days spiritual power in Shinnyoen was a rather wild and fiery thing, by explaining it as based on the *Nirvana Sutra* it has been distinguished from shamanistic practices, and now it is seen as a sublime and serious thing that anyone can possess. Below I will explain the practice of *sesshin*.

Sesshin is, first of all, a ceremony where the spirit medium points out to the fervent believer problems in daily life and offers direction in how to solve them. That direction is not something that comes from the spirit medium him/herself, but it is believed that it is a spiritual message sent from the *ryōdōji* 兩童子 (Shōjuin and Shinjō's two sons) in the spirit world. After some period has passed from when they entered the faith, Shinnyoen believers take as the goal of their faith to become spirit mediums themselves. In order to achieve spiritual rank they must participate in a special *sesshin* called *sōshōeza* 相承会座, and participation in *sōshōeza* is conditioned on the practice of the "Three Steps."¹³ *Sōshōeza* is the practice by which one becomes a spirit medium through the polishing of one's internal Buddha-nature. Through *sōshōeza* one advances through the spiritual ranks of *daijō* 大乘, *kangi* 歡喜, and *daikangi* 大歡喜, until finally receiving the "spirit breath" (*reikokyū* 靈呼吸) and becoming a spirit medium. (While Shōjuin was still alive, it was she who imparted the "spirit breath.") Once one has become a spirit medium, then one can conduct *sesshin* for other believers. As Shinjō explained:

What is most important is the individual's spiritual growth, and that the individual realizes for her/himself the path to happiness.... The main purpose of this practice is that the individual will grasp the spirit of the Buddha and give up his or her own opinions and conceptions so as not to distort the true spirit of the Buddha, to practice self-control.... For that reason, put simply, you can call it a method of spiritual direction that helps one see objectively one's own subjectivity. (MAINICHI SHINBUNSHA 2001, p. 128)

The spiritual message received does not offer a concrete way to resolve individual problems, but instead, within Shinnyoen the necessity of "prayer" is taught. Although *sesshin* itself is systematized and regulated, in the end individ-

12. Even if by chance a blow has been made to male-centered Shingonshū, this does not mean that the gender-structure of Shingonshū as a whole has changed, since Shōjuin is not regarded as a spirit medium by Shingonshū, nor is she considered to be a woman monk.

13. The Three Steps are financial contributions (*kangi* 歡喜), leading others to the faith (*otasuke* おたすけ), and service at Shinnyoen functions (*gohōshi* ご奉仕).

ual effort to give up one's own attachments and deepen one's prayer is what is demanded. Along with the spirit of *shōju* described above, reflecting on oneself and developing oneself while consulting the spiritual messages in prayer is what people today find attractive.

This can be said also of women who do not limit themselves to roles in the home but are engaged in other employments. "A" worked as a housewife for many years before a situation arose where she had to find employment outside the home:

Now it has become common for even housewives to work outside the home. Shinnyoen doesn't teach that outside employment prevents us from following the faith. What matters is whether we put into practice the spirit of the teaching in the companies where we work; that is the task that I believe we have been given by Shōjuin-sama. I believe that it was after I started working outside the home that I really began to live the faith. When you are working you meet all kinds of people, and sometimes your selfishness really begins to show. You really get a chance to put the faith into practice.

"C," a spirit medium who lived in the United States for a long time, was invited to join Shinnyoen by a female Japanese believer she met at work. Continuing to work full-time even after returning to Japan, "C" participates in Shinnyoen activities regularly, despite her busyness, and has progressed through the stages to become a spirit medium:

Despite being busy, I was determined to reflect on myself, to change, to polish myself through participating in *sesshin*. The example of Shōjuin-sama and Kyōshu-sama 教主さま, their way of approaching life, as well as reflecting on the messages you receive in *sesshin* really help with the various people you meet and the reactions you have in daily life. *Sesshin* gives you a chance to get in touch with the spirit of the other, it is a deep experience that you can't easily find elsewhere. This teaching tells us to take an active interest in your own life, to cut your own path through life. Just because you have become a spirit medium doesn't mean that you have been reborn or anything drastic like that. It's like your spirit is always in contact with a sacred, pure world, even while living in this world. Even though it can't be seen outwardly, it's like your essential part has expanded infinitely. It is a teaching that helps you to be a better person for the world.¹⁴

"C" says that when she first met the founder (*kyōshu*) she felt the words "I will become a bridge for others" arise naturally within herself. She now works as an employee of Shinnyoen:

14. From an interview conducted on 19 December 2002.

I enjoyed my former employment, and felt a great deal of satisfaction in it. If I had continued there I'm sure I would have been happy. However, I felt I would have a better chance of living the faith here, and I am happy now that I can be of some use to people.

Recent newsletters present accounts of several woman like "A" who are trying to live the faith through their work. For example:

I had some anxiety and doubts that trying to live the faith in the creative food business would restrict my own individuality. But that was just because I was not aware yet how broad this teaching is. Quite the opposite, it has opened up a dynamic source of creativity for me in planning my cuisine (food creator).

(*Naigai Jihō* 599: 9)

I became a lawyer because I wanted to be able to help people with problems. There are some clients who turn me down just because I am a woman. In *sesshin* I was told, "You need to give off a warmer tone." In the future I want to specialize in medical malpractice (lawyer).

(*Naigai Jihō* 598: 9)

I was given the spiritual message that "Your life is not your own, nor is your happiness your own," and so I am striving to work in society as a support for others (university lecturer specializing in welfare studies).

(*Naigai Jihō* 566: 9)

Because I had been bullied I lost all trust in others, and I was always uncomfortable at work. Ten years ago, when I had lost all self-confidence, I encountered Shinnyoen. My way of looking at people changed, and I began to feel grateful for being born as a human being. My anxieties and troubles disappeared, and I realized that my life is given as a gift of the great cosmos. I want to create music on the theme of the sacredness of this precious life (music composer).

(*Naigai Jihō* 565: 9)

Of course, not all women believers of Shinnyoen are as shining examples of women active in society as these women. For example, the following housewife in her forties is not presently working outside the home:

I entered Shinnyoen when I was a university student. After graduating I was a secretary for a while, but I quit when I got married. After giving birth to two children I wasn't able to participate in Shinnyoen activities the way I would have liked, and I was always impatient. But I put a picture of Shōjuin-sama where I could easily see it, and tried to find happiness in housework and in raising the children. I realized that what was important was to have the attitude of humbling yourself and serving others, and I started participating more actively in local volunteer work as well. Ten years ago I received the spiritual message that I should work to "bring people together, hand to hand," and I was given the rank of *kangi*. Because of my husband's job we will

be moving to the Philippines, and in the spirit of that message I want to work as a volunteer translator there. (Kangi Sekai 206: 98)

Women within the Organization

Within Shinnyoen, there is no distinction according to gender regarding the recognition of spirit mediums. In 1946, Kuriyama Jōshin, who had been a pharmacist, inherited spirit mediumship from Itō Tomoji one-and-a-half years after she became a believer. After that she served as the editor of the denomination's newsletter, and furthermore was sent to Hawai'i as the first foreign missionary. She later crossed to San Francisco to start the group's mission in the mainland United States, contributing greatly to Shinnyoen's development overseas. Following Kuriyama's example, many women are counted among Shinnyoen's spirit mediums. By March 1982 the number of spirit mediums had passed three hundred, and slightly more than half of them were women (SHINNYOEN KYŌGAKUBU 1996, pp. 167-70). At the end of 1990, the number of spirit mediums was reported as 824, with forty-six percent being men, and fifty-four percent women. In 1970 the percentages were reversed (men fifty-four percent, women forty-six percent), indicating a gradual rise in the percentage of women over the years.¹⁵ What I would like to point out here, however, is that there has generally been a balance in the number of men and women spirit mediums over the years.

Within Shinnyoen, the Chiryū Gakuin 智流学院 has been established for the training of teachers of the faith.¹⁶ There, on Saturdays and Sundays over the course of three years one can study Buddhist doctrine, the history of Shinnyoen, and how to perform Shinnyoen's ceremonies. After fulfilling the class requirements and passing an exam one can be qualified as an assistant teacher, and after one more year of practice and the fulfillment of the set requirements one can be recognized as a "teacher." After that, one can ask for ordination and obtain the rank of monk. In 2001 the number of male teachers was reported as 7,968, and women teachers numbered 29,786, indicating that the vast majority of teachers in Shinnyoen are women (BUNKACHŌ 2002).

One more position in Shinnyoen is that of *sujiōya* 経親. The *sujiōya* are leaders of usually over one hundred members, and they hold meetings of believers in their homes several times a month. While we do not have exact numbers of *sujiōya* according to sex, since the *sujiōya* is usually the one who introduces the members in his or her group to Shinnyoen and since they hold home-meetings we can assume that most of them would be women. For example, a survey of

15. The survey was conducted in 1991, with a sample of 618. See KAWABATA 1995, pp. 146-55.

16. The qualifications for acceptance to the Chiryū Gakuin are performance of the Three Practices, participation in at least one *sesshin*, participation in *sōshōeza*, and a recommendation from one's *sujiōya*, or group leader.

spirit mediums indicates that seventy-one percent of them were introduced to the faith by women (KAWABATA 1995, p. 153).

Shōjuin is considered to be the model of those who spread the faith, such as Kuriyama Jōshin mentioned above. Many of the early *sujiōya* were directed by Shōjuin. As "B," a *sujiōya* for over forty years who just recently retired, says, "Sujiōya are called to lose their own life for the sake of spreading the teaching. This is exactly what Shōjuin-sama did" (*Naigai Jihō* 540: 4–5). Another female *sujiōya* says, "We were raised in mercy, so even now when I face some difficulty or trouble I pray to Shōjuin-sama" (*Naigai Jihō* 537: 6). Or as "A," who has also served as a *sujiōya* for forty years, says,

When something wonderful happens for the salvation of someone I have led to the faith I know it is because of the power of Shōjuin-sama and Kyōshu-sama.... Our religion has been looked down upon as a new religion, and for that reason we have received a lot of opposition. But Shōjuin-sama always told us to use the opposition as a mirror [to reflect on our own actions].... We are sustained in life by those who we have led to faith.¹⁷

Presently Shinnyoen is led by the third daughter of Shōjuin and Shinjō, Masako 真砂子 (1942–). Briefly leadership was shared with their fourth daughter, Shizuko 志づ子, but she currently serves as director of the board of a foundation that directs Shinnyoen's social welfare activities in Japan and abroad. Of course, without the death of the founders' sons it would no doubt have been impossible for their daughters to take up the leadership, but nevertheless the fact that in the end women have succeeded the leadership in the group holds great meaning for Shinnyoen activities in the new generation.

In 1992 Masako was conferred with the rank of high priest by Daigo-ji, and in 1997, on the occasion of the dedication of the Shinnyo Sanmayadō 真如三昧耶堂 commemorating Shinjō at Daigo-ji, she became the first women to lead a service at the temple. In her formal greeting at the ceremony she indicated that the *Nirvana Sutra* teaches salvation for all, whether they are monastic or lay, male or female (*Kangi Sekai* 193: 7).

Although spirit mediumship and the ranks of priest are open to all without distinction according to sex in Shinnyoen, in fact it is usually men that one sees leading the group's ceremonies. Considering that Shinnyoen is in the lineage of Shingonshū, which holds even more strictly to the tradition of male dominance than other Buddhist sects, it is perhaps only natural that there be a tendency towards male-centeredness. Although it is only a recent development, however, women have begun to show their presence in ceremonies such as the *goma hōyō* 護摩法要. In November 1998, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the

17. For a detailed account of the activities of "A" see SHŪKYŌ SHAKAIGAKU NO KAI 2002, pp. 18–19.

founding of the group, in addition to foreign participants, two women participated in the *goma hōyō* held at the Shinnyoen temple in Yamanashi prefecture. Masako explained:

Kyōshu-sama never made any distinction between men and women, raising all equally in the faith, and entrusting the faith equally to all. His spirit was deep and open to all. Therefore, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of the faith I wanted to return to our original spirit, and thus chose this way [to perform the *goma hōyō*]. (Naigai Jihō 567: 4)

One of the participants in the ceremony was an elementary school teacher in her thirties, a member of Shinnyoen USA. She became a member at age twelve at the suggestion of her family, and she says that when she was told that the faith required you to “work for others” she could not understand why she had to be concerned for strangers she did not even know. Her doubts disappeared, however, as she began to spread the faith to her friends. At the conclusion of the *goma hōyō* she said, “It has fundamentally changed my faith. As I was participating in the ceremony I made the resolution to become a foundation for the faith overseas.” As one who is active in the education of handicapped children she says, “Children today need people with tender hearts like Shōjuin-sama. I want to reach the children’s hearts, and not only educate them academically” (Naigai Jihō 567: 9).

In the Spring of 2000, three women participated at a *Saitō goma hōyō* 齊燈護摩法要 held in San Francisco. From Masako’s comments it is clear that she consciously wanted this to be a practice of sexual equality. Here we can assume that her own thoughts regarding her mother as well as her own experience as a working woman are reflected. She told “C,” “Shōjuin was the first career woman in Shinnyoen. Let’s do our best!” “C,” who has lived abroad, says,

The culture of male dominance and female obedience is still strong in Japan. That was why I wanted to live in the US.... But the foundation of Buddhism is that all are equally saved. All we can do is take a global perspective and try to change Japanese culture. I believe Shinnyoen has a great role to play here.

We can expect that with the increasing number and further development of branches overseas the influence of Japanese gender culture will decrease, and there will be more and more women participating in Shinnyoen rites.

Conclusion

Although we can not make simple comparisons between Reiyūkai and Shinnyoen, it is true that the two groups were founded at about the same time, and thus we can assume that the leaders held similar views of life, and especially gender. In fact, there is much overlap in the women-directed teaching of Shōjuin and Reiyūkai’s

Kotani Kimi. The doctrines of the two groups are also similar in that they emphasize an internal change of attitude along with ancestor veneration. Although we can not ignore the fact that the two groups come from separate Buddhist lineages—esoteric and Nichiren—more than that it is their similarities that draw our attention. In emphasizing individual internal change they are responding to a contemporary movement towards individualism, but in terms of the strong organizational bonds and leader-worship they also inherit and maintain the traditional style of new religious movements in Japan. Although Shinnyoen bears many similarities with previous new religious groups, however, it also exhibits considerable creativity.

There are, in fact, many Buddhist-based new religions that reflect the pattern of female spiritualists and male organizers. Among them are groups where we see a movement from the initial emphasis on salvation through spiritual powers to one based on the learning of orthodox Buddhist doctrine, accompanied by an increase in male executives and the emergence of a male-centered denominational structure. When the domains of specialized knowledge and structural management are established as the “public” sphere, participation is often closed off to women (UMEZU 1996, pp. 128–29). In contrast to the many groups where we see a conservative movement regarding gender and a growing male dominance accompany the development of the group, Shinnyoen, while inheriting traditional views, chose the path of deepening individual spiritual development, with little regard to gender categories. Although a certain view of sexual roles was strong in the early days of the group (and has not disappeared even now), this did not become fixed, and we see a gradual movement towards its weakening. Distinct meanings are not attached to “women,” and thus an environment that also allows for women’s activities is established. In the present situation where it is difficult to find positive models of women’s spirituality Shinnyoen offers us a rare exception.

While it is hard to determine to what extent there was a consciousness of feminist influences during the group’s developmental period, we can at least see traces of it in discourse regarding “sexual equality at the root of Buddhism.” Of course, its achievement is still a goal for the future, and its realization still needs to be verified. It goes without saying that this remains an analysis of Shinnyoen alone, and from this one example we cannot speak about the religious situation of contemporary Japan in general.¹⁸ Unfortunately, there does not seem to be the awareness of the need to reform existing male-centered structures, even in

18. With regard to new religious movements that promote individual development through the use of meditation and other techniques, mention could be made of Aum Shinrikyō (now named Aleph), another esoteric religious movement from around the same time that Shinnyoen enjoyed rapid growth. Women in early Aum Shinrikyō fulfilled the role of “poster girls” and attracted considerable attention in the mass media, but at present they seem to have disappeared. No formal gender study of the group has yet been undertaken.

new religious movements that promote individual development in general. That is because rhetoric on spirituality does not automatically lead to freedom from traditional authority and traditional norms. In fact, we can see evidence of the progress of conservative, reactionary movements in Japanese society, such as the level 1 and 2 movements pointed out by Puttick. The desire to contain women's experience within some unified concept of "women" and to bottle that up in some cosmic, sacred order is not only something of the past. It is precisely for that reason that we need to question that mechanism.

This article has confirmed that the idea of a special category called "women" remains strong in research on new religious movements. By emphasizing that women are important actors in these groups that research challenges established histories, but it has also resulted in the confirmation of women's distinctiveness. We need to question the internalization of this tendency to contain the experiences of individual women within the unitary proposition of "women's experience."

The dilemma of equality and difference is a problem that many feminist researchers have faced, and I dare say we have not yet found an adequate solution. To overcome this problem we need to examine closely how the political terms of male and female, equality and difference have been created and used within the context of history. To borrow Scott's phrase, religious "history" is the fictional story of the universal subject. "We cannot write women into history, for example, unless we are willing to entertain the notion that history as a unified story was a fiction about a universal subject whose universality was achieved through implicit processes of differentiation, marginalization, and exclusion" (SCOTT 1988, p. 197). Analysis focusing on the activities of women as distinct from those of men is only one stage in critical historical studies. Researchers need to be aware of the politics involved in historical discourse and discipline themselves so that they do not recreate a gender order through the speech-praxis called research.

In the contemporary world it is not enough merely to know what position religion gives to women. We can expect that women in the future will give voice to their own experiences and feelings. What is demanded of researchers of new religious movements today is a reformist feminist practice that does not misconstrue the experience of women, but points out the unequal relationship of men and women through the recovery of lost data and the discovery of a new, meaningful religious world.

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