

Mark ROWE

Charting Known Territory

Female Buddhist Priests

This article explores issues of temple succession (*sesshū*), soteriology, and priestly identity through the experiences of three Buddhist women to demonstrate that female priests' experience eludes either/or contrasts between submission to male authority or feminist resistance to patriarchy and to argue for an assessment of women priests' agency on its own terms. Two of these women serve as abbots of temples, while one works as a deputy abbot (*fuku jūshoku*). They represent temple- and non-temple born (*zaike*), urban and rural temples, and different regions of the country. They have also each taken different paths to their current roles: one through marriage, and the other two through an unexpected death in the family. Relying on the voices of these priests, this article considers ways in which women navigate the basic pathways of priesthood: how they “choose” to be priests, how they are trained, and how they situate themselves in regard to institutional, doctrinal, and societal expectations. As such, this article also engages the ongoing concern of scholars and activists with politicized, normative approaches to agency in gender studies in non-Western contexts. Eschewing an assessment of what each of these priests offers in the way of resistance, this article instead considers how women priests' experiences allow us to redefine contemporary temple Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: female Buddhist priests—gender—non-eminent monks—discourses of decline—*sesshū*—temple succession—Nichiren—Shinshū—Jōdo—temple Buddhism

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THIS STUDY on issues of temple succession (*sesshū* 世襲),¹ soteriology, and priestly identity represents a small segment of a larger project to collect biographies of non-eminent monks (*shōsōden* 小僧伝).² In response to the general trend in Buddhist studies to date to focus on well-known exemplars of the tradition, I am concerned with uncovering stories of “ordinary” priests, both male and female. It is my contention that these lives are, in fact, both extraordinary and significant in what they can teach us about how temple Buddhism is lived. By focusing here on female priests, I argue that their experiences are illustrative of and inseparable from the broader context of institutional Buddhism. This point seems obvious, but it carries significant implications. Female priests experience temple Buddhism in ways that are both distinctive from and contiguous with those of male priests. I thus avoid isolating their stories solely in terms of female experience. What is most interesting to me is the ways in which female priests talk about the same things as their male counterparts, but in a different voice and from a different set of experiences. When we look at female priests not simply for insights into how their experiences differ from men’s, but rather take their stories on their own merits, we discover a Buddhist world that is both familiar and under-explored, one with landmarks, coastlines, and boundaries that remain largely unmapped.

The question of voice will come up later in this article, but I would like to position it here as a central metaphor. Female priests regularly told me stories concerning issues that arose because of the higher pitch of their voices when chanting with male priests: being bullied by parishioners and fellow priests, consciously lowering or hiding their voices, or training daily to try to match their voice to those of the men. Much as they chant the same sutras as men, though in a different octave, women’s experiences of the issues that confront all priests occur, quite literally, in a different register. This is in no way an attempt to ignore the extensive catalogue of very real discriminations every female priest I have met could list, nor to appropriate, silence, or deflect their voices. My goal is rather to situate and contextualize those voices as both part of a broader temple Buddhist institution and as a means of providing fresh insight into its parame-

1. This is typically glossed as “hereditary” (system), but for our purposes *sesshū* refers to passing on the temple to the children, ideally the son, of the abbot (*jūshoku*).

2. Readers may recognize the pun here on the textual tradition representing biographies of eminent monks (*kōsōden* 高僧伝).

ters. I want to deepen our understandings of both the experiences of individual female priests and of the larger forces at play, both sectarian and social.

A second aim, then, is to situate the experiences of these female priests in societal flows. Gender is no more confined to temple grounds than faith or family. The expectations acting upon mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters take on a particular color in temples, but they reflect society at large. Pressures on temple succession and on women's support thereof come not only from specific temple communities but are also informed by the greying of Japanese society, the drop in the birth rate, demographic shifts, and changing ideas about individuality and family norms that shape contemporary Japan.

Theoretical Context

The last twelve years have seen the publication of several books suggesting a revival of Japanese Buddhism (FUJII 2004; UEDA 2004; NELSON 2013). Putting aside the question of how representative of the current state of Japanese Buddhism the six priests featured in Ueda's *Ganbare Bukkyō!* (Give it your best, Buddhism!) and the four in Nelson's *Experimental Buddhism* are, and turning a blind eye to the particular temple realities each priest faces,³ there are two elements of those books that require attention here. First, neither book features a woman.⁴ Are we to believe, then, that female Buddhist priests are neither innovative nor giving it their all? More vexing than the exclusion of women from these accounts of Buddhist renewal are the underlying assumptions that render the activities of female priests throughout Japan all but invisible to regnant frameworks for the study of Buddhism. Take, for example, the efforts of Reverend Akira,⁵ the daughter and abbot of a rural Shimane temple who spends most of the year offering guest sermons across the country in order to support her elderly parents and her tiny rural temple in a village that has lost twelve temples to depopulation in the last ten years.⁶ Without approaches that both include female priests and expand the meaning of innovation and effort so as to acknowledge their varied activities, priests like Akira will remain out of sight. Such omissions

3. For example, the two priests that both Nelson and Ueda cover run temples under very favorable conditions: Reverend Takahashi's rural temple sits on a natural hot spring, for instance, and Reverend Akita can run his sub-temple with no graves because it sits on the grounds of a successful temple with a huge graveyard in urban Osaka.

4. Nelson allots a little over three pages of text to a female Shinshū priest, but she is not a main character of the book (NELSON 2013, 192–96).

5. The priests discussed in this article are not identified by their actual names.

6. Since not one of the priests featured in Nelson or Ueda faced anything like these conditions, it is difficult to say if they still would have qualified for that scholarly attention had they inherited a temple with only thirty parishioner families in rural Shimane.

keep our picture of contemporary Japanese Buddhism decidedly androcentric and woefully incomplete.

My unease with the *ganbare*/experimental approach also concerns the way in which it participates in and thus serves to amplify the popular narrative of the decline of Japanese Buddhism. Books in this vein are invested in an image of “Buddhist renaissance,” to use Ueda’s term, and so take Buddhist degeneration as given. Though it is beyond the purview of the present article to fully engage with what I am calling “discourses of decline” in Japanese Buddhism, it is worth noting that what exactly is declining, by what measure, and in what way unique to Buddhism is rarely taken up in these studies.⁷ In the case of Shimane mentioned above, in addition to the closure of twelve temples, the hospital, elementary school, and most of the businesses have also shut down. Yet these latter closures are not seen as signalling the breakdown of national healthcare, primary education, and entrepreneurship in Japan. Why must temple closings be taken solely as proof of existential malaise? By accepting the decline of Japanese Buddhism as a baseline against which to measure the innovativeness and daring of a tiny sample of male temple abbots, these books do little to advance our understanding of Japanese Buddhism more broadly. The narrow range of what constitutes Buddhist resurgence to date carries with it the same gender assumptions that previous, normative frameworks for understanding the tradition did—a view that at worst excludes women entirely or at best casts them as marginal figures. If the study of contemporary Japanese Buddhism fails to include women, it fails.

Buddhist Studies has seen a welcome increase in the number of studies of women and gender over the past two decades, but most have been historical (CABEZON 1992; FAURE 2003; GROSS 1992; NISHIGUCHI 1987; 1993; 2005; RUCH 2002; SHAW 1994; WILSON 1996) and have focused on nuns (CLARKE 2010 and 2014; MEEKS 2010; KIM 2014; SCHOPEN 2014; YÜ 2013). While crucial, such textual and archaeological research neglects the vast majority of female Buddhist professionals in contemporary Japan who are not celibate monastics (nuns) but are instead ordained priests, professional sermonizers, or temple abbots. Ethnographic research, both in Japan and elsewhere, has also looked primarily at nuns (ARAI 1999; GUTSCHOW 2004; HEIRMAN 2011; SALGALDO 2013). Recent studies have begun to expand the scope of inquiry (AMBROS 2015; CAVALIERE 2015; FISHER 2014; HEIDEGGER 2010; KAWAHASHI 2003 and 2012; SCHRIMPF 2015; STARLING 2013 and 2015), including important work on temple wives as religious professionals (STARLING, forthcoming).

A key insight from these works on female Buddhists concerns how they express their own subject positions. Moving beyond prescriptive ideas of agency prevalent in Western feminism, scholars in the West have been following Saba

7. Jolyon Thomas’s important work is a welcome corrective to this trend (THOMAS 2016).

Mahmood in separating the “analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism” (MAHMOOD 2005, 153). As she argues, when feminist scholarship recognizes only subversive forms of agency, consigning other forms of purposive action to “resignification of hegemony,” it risks overlooking other modes of agency—such as those found in religious contexts—that may be poorly understood within interpretive norms built on a perceived binary opposition between subversion or subjugation. A central aim of this article is to demonstrate how Buddhist women’s experience encompasses far more than such either/or contrasts and thus demands assessment of female priests’ agency on its own terms.

Like a radar ping that clearly illuminates a previously hidden coastline, the stories of female priests shine a light on elements of temple and institutional Buddhism that have remained all but invisible to much of our scholarly vision. Narratives of female priests in Japan, whether resistive or not, reveal aspects of institutional, cultural, and doctrinal limits, as well as disciplining that might otherwise go unnoticed by scholars. Here, I seek to articulate the ways in which the female priests presented in this article construct and inhabit their clerical roles *as women*—as self-determinate agents who represent a product of, a perpetrator of, and reformulator of prevailing norms. MAHMOOD outlines an approach that sees agency “not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms” (2005, 15). Like Mahmood, I want to follow ABU-LUGHOD’s approach to resistance as a diagnostic of power (1990, 42). To look only for stories of female priests rejecting or co-opting androcentric teachings would neglect how women use a variety of tools at their disposal to live Buddhist lives.⁸ Thus while some of the stories here reflect resistance, others might read more like capitulation or simply getting by.

Methodological Considerations

One might rightly ask how my position as a white, male researcher affiliated with well-known universities affected the approach of my research, the content of my questions, and the responses of the female priests with whom I was speaking. This point is well taken, though difficult to answer. I cannot be completely aware of how my biases might have played out. Having spoken to literally hundreds of priests and learning their shorthand and the topics about which they feel passionate, I like to think, perhaps naively, that this made it easier for these priests to talk to me. It may also be the case that as a foreigner I do not fit immediately into expected gender roles. I am not arguing that they did not see me as male, but perhaps not the same type of male as, say, a Japanese researcher. And

8. Lori Meeks’s insight into the ways in which Buddhist women “talk past” androcentric norms is instructive here (MEEKS 2010, chapter 7).

even though I was an outsider, I relied almost exclusively on “lateral introductions” from friends, colleagues, and classmates. This approach minimized the impression of top-down or institutional investment in my research. I intentionally avoided introductions from sectarian leaders that might make priests feel obligated to speak to me, self censor, or question what might be done with the information I was gathering.

I should note here that there were times in interviews—such as with the Horimotos, detailed below—when the conversation, though not overtly misogynistic, clearly reflected “old boy network” assumptions. I have chosen not to sterilize these moments both because it would alter the flow of conversation and because this is precisely how people talk in these spaces. I also did not want to make myself look better. I accept my complicity in not rejecting these exchanges (sometimes even taking part), but I would hasten to point out that my cowardice extended to other areas—politics, wartime complicity, history textbooks, and a host of other topics about which I did not say what I was actually thinking at the time for fear of offending my interlocutors.⁹

My overarching approach in this work is to follow Fuchs’s dictum that “who speaks, who writes, and who interprets matter” (FUCHS 2003, 98). My aim is always to let priests speak for themselves about their lives and experiences, to let gender issues emerge naturally in conversation without steering us there, and to be sensitive to silences and self-edits. I feel it is imperative that the priests I interview speak in their own voices. To that end I include some of the inevitable misunderstandings and miscues from our discussions. Too often interviews are cleaned up and presented to readers as perfectly formed and without the texture of actual communication. In contrast, my approach is meant not only to increase transparency, but also to challenge existing norms of writing that present the interviewee as simply parroting the foregone conclusions of an omniscient, usually male, scholar.

Part One: The Obligations of Succession

In what follows, I offer narratives of three female priests in order to help triangulate a field of possibilities. The individuals remain present and identifiable, but, taken together, their overlaps and distinctions suggest the outlines of a much bigger picture. The article is structured in two parts, with a parallel arrangement of two themes: the constraints of temple succession (*sesshū*) and intersections with gender. All of the conversations in this first section demonstrate what I call

9. The only times I went head to head with a priest were when I knew he or she was spinning me a line. I had heated arguments, for example, over Shinshū uniqueness, the quality of sectarian education, and the ethics of starting a new grave site without a temple successor in place. Readers should judge me as they like for these choices and they are free to make their own decisions when they undertake similar work.

the “obligations of succession”: Honda, a temple-born daughter from Tokyo who had to take over when her brother died unexpectedly; Horimoto, a first daughter from rural Niigata who was pressured to go to a sectarian university and marry someone who would agree to take on the family’s priestly mantle; and Ishida, a lay woman who married into a Hokkaido temple but was later trapped by *seshu* commitments when her husband died.

“I couldn’t marry someone I loved.”

In western Niigata city, about thirty minutes by car from downtown, one finds a medium-sized, nicely appointed Ōtani-ha temple. I was there to interview Reverend “Horimoto,” an animated, gregarious priest who insisted on sprinkling English phrases into his speech—a result of having spent time in his younger years as a missionary priest (*kaikyōshi*) in Los Angeles. I was pleased to see that his wife, also dressed in robes, would join us, but I was a little surprised when she pulled out a notebook and began writing things down throughout the afternoon. It quickly became evident that she would be an equal partner in the conversation, not afraid to interrupt, talk over, or correct her husband. In many ways she was the impetus for my current study of female priests. How many other conversations might I have had if the temple wife, mother, daughter, or sister had joined us? What else could I have learned?

They were an arranged marriage, he a second son from a temple in Gifu and she the oldest daughter of the temple in which we sat. They were both previously married, both, in their words, “having one strike against them” (*batsu ichi*). Let me begin by contrasting how each of them experienced coming of age as temple-born.

Mark: I’ve heard that, particularly at Ōtani and Ryūkoku, well, at any sectarian university, that the second sons are very popular.

Husband: Yes, yes.

M: That they get targeted by temple daughters. I don’t know whether or not it’s to that extent, but it’s what I’ve heard.

H: People ask all the time. From girlfriends, from anyone. “Are you a first son, a second son?” When I told them I was a second son, (they got starry eyed and said) “Whooaa!”

M: (laughing) One more time?

H: (laughing) “Eek! Eek!”

It is hard to fully convey how incongruous it was to see this formally-dressed, sixty-three-year-old priest put his hands up to his face, flash his eyelashes, and squeal like an anime school girl. That he was doing this with his wife sitting right there glaring at him only heightened the incongruity.

Wife: Really?!

M: I’m sorry, this conversation...

W: It's fine.

H: That's what it was like.

M: Fascinating. So it really was like that.

H: It was, it was. I had many people (who asked me that).

M: Did you get offers (to marry into a temple)?

H: Yes, several. But I wanted to study more.... Well, I thought once I graduate and gain some self-confidence, I might go that way ... but while I was still in school, I thought it was too soon for me to go (into some temple).

Despite demurring when her husband did his starry-eyed, college girl impression, Horimoto had no hesitation in voicing her opinions about the family pressures on temple daughters to bring in husbands and on temple wives to toe the line. This is how she describes what it is like growing up on the other side of the temple succession equation.

W: I was incredibly conflicted (over my destiny). [Crosstalk.] Recently I met a friend from middle school who blurted out that even when I was an elementary school student, I was telling her I couldn't marry someone I loved. I was shocked to hear this. Even though I was just a child (I came to this realization). I had told her that my parents decided who could come to the house.

M: Are you the oldest daughter here?

W: Yes, I am the oldest daughter. There's nothing I can do about it.

M: Do you have your (priestly) license?

W: When I went to Ōtani, I went into the Buddhist Studies department. Since I was the successor, my father ordered it. [Her husband laughs.] My father told me to go to Buddhist Studies. He told me that since I wasn't very smart, it was the only place I could go. Because of that I never aspired to go anywhere but there. So I chose that, went there. Then he said live in the dorm. I was in the girl's dorm. Every friend I met in the dorm, whether she was a first daughter or not, took the priest license. Of the four of us in the dorm room, we all did. And if you ask why you should take it, you're told "At the General Assembly of the Sect (*shūgikai*), if you don't have a vote, you'll have problems (*komaru*)."

M: I'm sorry?

W: A vote at the parliament (*gikai* 議会). You get one (if you have your license). Another of my friends told me "You say you'll marry a husband into the temple but if he dies, the temple will be taken away from you."

M: [Mistaking her point] But if you have a license, he can't take it away, right?

W: If the husband (*omukosan*) dies.

M: Aaah.

W: That's why he told me to get it. It's better if the temple is cared for by a single family. [crosstalk] I heard that from everyone around me. I was so surprised. They kept asking "Why won't you get it, why won't you get it?" "Okay, I'll get it," I said.

M: Is this a common story? Regardless of area?

W: Very common. Regardless. Wherever you go, it's just assumed.

M: Even in city temples?

W: No difference between city or rural temples. So to make a long story short, in order to continue maintaining the temple, my parents acted like that and raised me like [garbled] from a young age. Even for girls, times have changed.

M: So parents won't force sons, but they'll force the daughters (to succeed the temple).

W: Right. When I realized it was like that, I was so surprised. I thought it was more for the boys.

Not only was much of Horimoto's early life course predetermined, so too were those of many of her friends. It is also worth comparing how she was ordered to become a priest, whereas her husband seemed to have more control over his life choices.¹⁰ The entire horizon of possibilities for her was decided by her birth; her father told her she was stupid, and it never occurred to her that there might be other paths to take. Note how much more consequential Horimoto's choices are: she has to marry someone who will take over, someone who is not "too weird." Consider also the strategic elements involved in her pursuing a priestly license—to protect her in case the husband dies and to ensure a vote at the sect's assembly. Though some accounts of women taking over temples or getting a priestly license focus on faith-based decisions (SCHRIMPF 2015), my own interviews consistently revealed a far more complex set of motivations. Faith came up in our discussion, but not in terms of how or why Horimoto became a licensed priest.¹¹

"It was that shit priest from Kyoto."

"Honda-san" is a sixty-one-year-old abbot of a small, 370-year-old, Pure Land temple nestled between a fast-food restaurant and a business hotel in central Tokyo. She is the twenty-fifth abbot (fourth Honda) to run this temple. Since her older brother was in line to take over, Honda was free to do as she pleased as a child. As she tells it, she was a wild youth, running the "Black Emperors" biker gang with friends and later, after graduating with a degree in sociology, working at a furrier store that catered to gangsters. She married at twenty-eight to a classmate but they could not have children because she developed uterine cancer. He was the first son of a main branch (*honke*) family with a business and, despite being married thirteen years, he divorced her because she could

10. Of course, the difference in their temple situations—he a second son with his home temple's succession secured, and she a first daughter at a temple without a male heir—also explains why their trajectories differed. Had he been a first son, the pressure on him to enter the priesthood would likely have been far more acute.

11. Later in our conversation, Horimoto spoke openly about the brightness that came to her in the middle of the temple hall or the ways in which being a woman allowed her to more fully understand the idea of other power (*tarikī*) that forms the basis of the soteriology and metaphors of all Shinshū-based sects.

not give the family a son. She became a shut-in after the divorce, but eventually recovered to the point where she started working at an animal hospital. Initially hired to answer phones, she moved up to nursing duties, even though she had no formal training or certification. In her thirteenth year at the hospital, her brother got sick and died in 2005 at the age of fifty-four. Despite only attending a Christian high school and having no Buddhist training beyond hearing *jātaka* tales¹² at bedtime as a child, she was convinced by the local priests to take over.

H: At that time the priests who were in the youth association with my brother helped me out and persuaded me. “There’s nothing but for you to take over,” one of them told me. My grandfather, I don’t really know anything about it, but he was someone connected to creating systems for chanting sutras at Jōdo [Sect] rituals, and various things. It seems he wrote the musical notation for sutras. Even now, the people doing rituals at Zōjōji (talk about him). Since my famous grandfather’s blood flows in my veins, they told me to take over. But I didn’t understand any of it, I had no idea it would be such an ordeal.

M: About how old were you?

H: Forty-nine. So, I had no ... my brother passed in September so I was still forty-eight when they said this to me. I had no idea, so I was like “Oh, so that’s how it is. Won’t it be difficult?” And he said “It’ll be fine, it’ll be fine.” [My involuntary burst of laughter interrupts her briefly before she continues recounting the exchange.] Really is it okay? “It’s fine, it’s fine, totally fine” he’d say. One of his cohort was sixty years old. Yeah, so, if someone like that is there ... well I’ll be fine, I thought, I’m not even fifty yet. “You’ll be totally fine, you were a swimmer,” he said. Yeah, I was a competitive swimmer ... all the way from elementary I competed. [...] Because I did that I had stamina, so I was told the training would be no concern. “Is that it?” I thought. If a sixty-year-old can do it, then for me, not yet fifty, I had some pride, you know? So I went.

M: And? [Laughing]

H: It was outrageously hard! Like being hit by a truck (*bachaan to iu gurai taihen deshita*).

Honda is not only referring to the four, thirty-day retreats of formal training (*yōsei kōza*) that all Pure Land Sect priests must go through to be licensed, but also to the obstacles she faced even before being allowed to train. Given the early morning practice sessions she had to undergo for six months just to get to the point where she could begin formal training, her experience even getting accepted left her questioning the whole enterprise. During her interview for entrance into the training hall, the priest in charge made a major fuss about the paperwork, particularly the list of medicines she was taking.

12. *Jātaka* tales are stories of the previous lives of the historical Buddha.

H: You have to submit a medical certificate, you know. I had clearly had uterine cancer. Since it had been completely extirpated I was on hormone treatment. But I felt totally cured ... since it had been ten years I was told I was cured so that's what I wrote on the forms. But you also have to write down all the medication you're on because you have to take that in with you. So he said, "If you're writing that medicine down, you're lying. If you're taking medicine then you're not cured, are you?" I objected, but he insisted "you're not cured, are you?" Even though I explained "I'm totally cured, but this medicine is hormonal treatment and if I don't take it my body can't produce hormones. So I take it to compensate for that." He became outraged (*ranbō*) and yelled "You wrote this!" "You filled out this medical form!" I completely lost it and shouted "I don't have to go over this point by point with someone who's not even my boyfriend!" My master (*shishō*) said he nearly lost it, too. Someone at this age doing her best to enter this world, despite all these factors, how could there be anyone who would say this is the point to stop her?

Usually when priests were about to tell me something shocking or details that might implicate another priest, they would look down at my digital recorder and catch themselves before actually saying what was on their minds. There is little that more clearly conveys Honda's biting sarcasm, independent character, and unbridled contempt for the patriarchal biases of institutional Buddhism than the fact that instead of demurring, she said the name to me quietly, then looked down, cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted it two more times into the recorder as she cursed him out in the sing-song voice of a television game show announcer: "It was that shit priest (*kuso bōzu*) from Kyoto, that shit priest named 'Fujimoto.' It's Fujimoto-san ... heeeeeee's insane!"

Honda's story of taking over evokes a common theme in the lives of female temple abbots: pressure to take over—often later in life and with little or no training—after the death of a sibling, parent, or spouse. Unlike Horimoto, Honda was not raised for the lifestyle she now inhabits. Like many narratives of head female priests, her story provides a particular perspective on temple Buddhism in both its localized and institutional contexts. Though she would qualify as temple-born in any survey, her experiences of working in the "real world" for over a quarter century before experiencing the life of a temple priest marks her as more of a layperson. Indeed, much of our conversation centered on her critique of temple-born priests and their distorted understanding of money.

H: Most priests have lost their financial sense. That is, they've never worked. There's no need to work outside the temple. So they understand, with their heads, but they don't get the reality of it. But I've worked outside, I've lived on my own, so (I know) 1,000 yen [approximately ten U.S. dollars] is important. [...] The temples I'm talking about now, when there's a funeral we talk about

the first *obon* after death (*nibon*). They tell me they get 100 *man* [10,000 U.S. dollars] for it. I'm like, huh?!

"Yeah, it's 100 *man* at my place."

But aren't there people who can't pay? What do you do when they say they can't pay?

"Of course there are some who can't pay. To those people I say 'What is the meaning of the deceased for you (*anata ni totte no hotokesama te iu no wa dō iu mono na no ka*)?'"

I tell them, that's not right.

M: That's why people think it's a scam.

Right?! Priests are hidden behind a veil. It's unreal.

Honda stands as an outsider to much of her tradition, as someone who must constantly wear a mask to hide her true thoughts. She regularly runs up against the limits (institutional, doctrinal, customary) of her sect and it is precisely those encounters that are so often missing from accounts of male priests.

"Women have to be abbots and wives. Husbands only have to be abbots."

Born to a lay family in the northern city of Sapporo in 1952, Ishida married into a Nichiren Sect temple at twenty-one. It was a marriage arranged by her father, a policeman, who told her it would be just like marrying a salaryman.

M: Before that did you have any connection to Buddhism or religion?

I: My family were parishioners of this temple. The father [of her husband] came to do services at the house (*mairi*) and I happened to be off work that day and served him tea. So he said to me, "If you aren't married yet, won't you meet my son?"

M: That kind of destiny (*en*) is remarkable. [Despite an assistant helping run the temple office, we are interrupted by one of many calls that required Ishida's attention.] So you dated.... Did you have any understanding of being a temple wife then?

I: No ... sort of. My father told me that it was no different from (marrying) a salaryman. [Crosstalk] He told me since all I had to do was protect the household (*ie no naka*), it was no different from marrying a salaryman, so not to worry. [She laughs freely at the memory.]

M: It didn't end up like that.

I: Not like that. Not like that at all.

I asked her whether she got a priestly license when she married, but she replied that at the start she had no intention of becoming a temple wife so she did not. "The only license I got was my driver's license" [laughing]. She took ordination ten years into the marriage because her husband said it was a good idea. She generally visited the parishioners she knew and chanted sutras (*danka mawari*). The family ran two temples in the area. She and her husband took over the smaller

temple (350 households) while his father ran the larger (650 households). Eventually she and her husband took over both temples. She gave birth to a son and a daughter, but then her husband died in 1995 when she was forty-two years old. Her son was fifteen at the time. Her brother-in-law, who was running the smaller temple temporarily, asked that her son eventually take over. Ishida was thus faced with having to choose her son's future when he was still too young to decide it himself. She eventually decided to take over as head priest. She took the basic priestly knowledge exam (*otsu* level) and went to the Nichiren Sect training center, Shingyō Dōjō, on Mt. Minobu in 1996. She was installed as abbot in a ceremony in June of that year.

In addition to worrying about her son's future, she had her own serious doubts. As a lay person who married into the temple world with no idea what she was in for, she felt a large gap between what she saw as the pure faith of the parishioners and the more business-minded realities of running a temple. She also ran into trouble because, as someone coming from outside the Buddhist world, she questioned everything. As she put it, "a lay-born has lots of questions, but a daughter born in the temple has no doubts." There was a lot of opposition at first. She told me that it is expected that big temples will be run by men. Once installed, though, the double standards did not end. "Women have to be abbots and wives," she told me. "Husbands only have to be abbots."

I: It [taking over the temple] was no joke. I knew nothing.... All I had done to that point was be a housewife. In Nichiren we call it temple wife (*jitei fujin*), but that's [all] I was.

M: Another path ... there was the possibility to leave the temple.... In that case you had various possibilities, but you chose to become abbot, that's extraordinary.

I: I thought of leaving. I struggled with it. My child was young, I had a son. He was still in elementary, no, first year of middle school, I think. When my husband was dying he told me to have my son take over.

M: His last wish.

I: He said, "Protect both the temples and have our son take over." So I really struggled with it. At that time, I felt that temples and the temple way of doing things was institutional and systematized and I had doubts about whether it could even be done. It made me feel really uncomfortable. (You should) leave this part out ... this is just between us.¹³ I believe the general parishioners have a much stronger faith (than priests). They can believe purely. But when you become a priest, there's some aspect that doesn't allow that.

M: In other words, faith (*shinkō*) versus management (*un'ei*)?

13. I have received specific permission from Ishida to include this account as is.

I: That's it. I guess it's running the temple. In order to protect this temple, you have to consider things that aren't [faith]. That's where I thought, no, that's not it. That's what I believed at the time. You can't do it on pure faith.

M: I think everyone experiences that. Everyone struggles with that. Even those born in temples.

I: That's right. I get it. When I became abbot, I thought that everyone feels this. There's something you understand once you actually do it.

M: It's like the difference between how you feel about your parents when you're a child versus how you feel when you become a parent yourself.

I: Right, right. It's something you get when you start experiencing it.

M: But at that time when you felt it was strange. Was it only that gap (of experience)?

I: It was that and [the fact] that the Buddhist world (*bukkyōkai*) is very cold to women.

M: I don't know if it is especially the case with the Nichiren sect, but I hear that a lot.

I: It doesn't seem that it's only the Nichiren sect.

M: By that you mean...

I: I hear that the Sōtō sect is the same.

M: Maybe the Shinshū people would say they support temple wives (*bōmori*) more than other sects?

I: Maybe (the issue is) authority (*kenryoku*), or just because one is given a position where they can speak. They receive just a rank, and even though together with the abbot they work as hard as possible to manage the temple, they do not have the right to speak. I guess I had that. So as a woman, even if I did it, I felt it would be incredibly difficult. I struggled with it terribly.

M: I bet. One issue would have been thinking about your son's future and wondering if the temple would be good or [if you should] create a way for him to escape.

I: That's it. I felt that no matter what, if my son didn't say himself that he wanted to do it, I'd quit.

M: It's usually decided for first-born temple sons.

I: I didn't want to thrust it upon him so if he decided to do it I'd back him up, but in the interim if I didn't hold the temple, we'd have no space to make a choice.

M: At the time, did you consult with your son? As a first-year middle school student he couldn't really understand.

I: He didn't understand.... He said he wouldn't. When I asked him indirectly, he said "I won't do it. I won't take over." I thought about it, about maintaining (*mamoru*) the temple. I wondered if I could maintain it until he decided to take over. And the parishioners wanted someone they knew to take over. Rather than someone coming from some completely different place, they had a

strong feeling that they wanted people they knew as family to take over. I guess that's where my decision to take over came from.

Here we see a common, but largely unexplored pattern resulting from a married clergy—the abbot passes away leaving the wife in an extremely precarious position. Unspoken in her description of deciding to succeed her husband is the fact that had Ishida not taken over, she and her children would have had to leave the temple once a new abbot was found. This is not to say that Ishida was hiding economic motivations, but rather to fully contextualize her decision. Temple succession is not simply a logistical pressure acting on temple wives to produce an heir. Breaks in generational succession reveal the system's dependence on “complete” families and the extent to which a temple family's *raison d'être* centers on procreation as much as it does on Buddhist propagation.

What prepares a person for this possibility? Even after over twenty years at the temple, having been ordained and having carried out ritual services, she still considered herself a subordinate temple housewife. In addition to the uncertainty of deciding her child's entire future when he was still in middle school was Ishida's doubt about the entire enterprise. Ishida's experiences with local (temple), national (institutional), and dogmatic (doctrinal) forms of misogyny made her understandably loath to continue working within the temple. Further, as a consequence of starting as an outsider to temple Buddhism, she had serious doubts about the commitment and faith of the priests she had met. Intriguingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, in the end Ishida faced the same source of pressure that temple-born individuals confront when deciding their futures—the obligation to the parishioners. Here, too, we see the way in which family Buddhism plays out: the parishioner households almost always prefer someone from the family they know over someone new. It is worth pondering whether, had Ishida not had a son, she would have encountered the same pressures to take on the role of temple priest.

Part Two: Gender, Identity, and Temple Life

In the second part of this article, we turn from a focus on temple succession to various intersections of temple life and gender. First, we hear from Horimoto on the local temple wives association (*bōmorikai*), and then we turn to Ishida's doctrinal discussion of misinterpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*. Finally, we return to Honda for an extended look at how her life as temple-born, but with a long history outside of the Buddhist world, shapes her interpretation of Pure Land doctrine and women's place in temple Buddhism. These discussions reveal how women see strictures and social forces that men in the same posts might not even perceive.

“It’s such a crazy world.”

As we saw above, Horimoto’s father exerted severe pressure on her to go to a sectarian university and get her priestly license. But there are other significant areas of disciplining temple women that may be carried out by other women. Being a temple daughter, Horimoto did not have to deal with marrying into a temple and being (cons)trained by her mother-in-law. This background gave her the freedom to be more proactive in local associations like the temple wives group (*bōmorikai*), but it also brought her face to face with the stark realities other temple wives face.

Horimoto: Since my mother doesn’t go to the temple wife’s meetings any more, I go. But since there was no one my age, I invited (the wife from a nearby temple). I repeated my request many times, but no one came. I invited the husband, too, to come with his wife, but they never came. Whoever I asked (at that temple), on the surface it’s all about equality. They talk equality, but when I ask her to attend or others to encourage her to attend, then the mother says “I’m fine with her attending, but my son’s against it.” Or the son says, “I’m fine with the idea, but my wife doesn’t want to go.” Everyone tells you it’s someone else who’s against it but the reality is that because of this kind of discord, they still haven’t come. It’s so unnatural. It’s such a crazy world. The wives can’t leave the temple (to attend meetings). The young people also won’t come. That kind of (freedom) isn’t accepted.

Mark: Is that the mother’s fault? Or ... who’s holding them back?

Husband: The mothers, right.

Horimoto: Number one is the mother. In the end she just told me straight and said, “the bride still has so much to learn at home, she’s finally learned to take her bath after everyone else and clean it all up before she comes out. I’ve finally trained her to that point.” And that’s why (inviting them to the *bōmorikai*) doesn’t work. It’s impossible to talk to these people. But of course they say “Go ahead, go ahead. Go drinking, go have a good time.”

M: They’re worried the young people will learn something unacceptable?

Horimoto: Right, that’s what they say. So they cleanly divide their true feelings (*honno*) and their public words (*tatema*).

M: Like (they’re going to catch) a virus.

Horimoto: Right. They’re worried about (the daughters) acquiring some new sensibility. I tell them it’s not like that, we only say what everybody knows. How can this still be happening, I wonder.

The conversation veers into other topics before returning to the theme of daughter-in-laws being kept at home.

Horimoto: I literally heard this (talk of keeping temple wives in the temple). There’s even a person who gave up her marriage because of it. [Sighs deeply] She came out to the *bōmorikai* bringing [garbled]. She said, “when I entered the temple, I was told by the abbot that he wanted to spread the faith together

and serve the parishioners (*monto*). But in the end the truth (*honne*) was that they never let me out of the temple.” She lives very close to here. I know her well. On the surface they say we’re all in it together, we’re equal. (That’s what they say) in public.

This dialogue pushes us to consider constraints acting on Buddhist women that do not reach the level of the institutional misogyny faced by Honda at the training hall or the doctrinal limits discussed by Ishida in the next section. Female temple priests also face culturally-based boundaries and those may be policed by other women. This example of how temple wives (and daughters/sisters) are disciplined within the local temple community hints at the complexity facing the scholar looking to explore gender issues in contemporary Japanese Buddhism. The limits here are not just Buddhist. Certainly there are institutional aspects, but there are also societal expectations and norms that necessitate situating what goes on in the temple within a broader context.¹⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, the study of Buddhism cannot stop at the temple gates (ROWE 2011). In the same way, a study of Buddhist women must explore all of the intertwined threads of institutional limits on female leadership, sutras that detail women’s soteriological inferiority, as well as long-standing cultural expectations for women to obediently produce heirs and maintain a household.

“I really wonder if Shakyamuni thought like that.”

Ishida has spent a lot of time within sectarian circles battling for a better position for women in the sect. Part of her work involves giving talks around the country and being active in sectarian women’s groups. As such, she regularly brought our conversation to the Buddhist stance on women. The endemic misogyny she described to me almost kept her from taking over the temple until her son came of age. Her discussion with me of gender issues was not initially limited to Nichiren Buddhism, but to the more fundamental issue of Buddhism in the time of Shakyamuni and a concern with interpretation.

M: As someone who started out as a layperson, how have your feelings about Buddhism changed?

I: They’ve gotten much deeper. I’ve done a lot of studying and read a lot. But one thing I don’t understand is the true intention of why Shakyamuni Buddha did not accept a women’s order. We have the teachings, but those are all words written down later by people who heard them. So we don’t know the true intention. I wonder about that.

M: And written by men, at that.

14. Jessica Starling’s forthcoming book on *bōmori* should go a long way toward addressing these issues.

I: Right. But there's also the historical context and societal influences. There are those who say that if you realize that the teachings were written in those contexts, you can understand them, but I really wonder if Shakyamuni thought like that.

M: It's hard to believe.

I: Yes, hard to believe.

M: And the *Lotus Sutra* is one of the more positive texts in terms of women.

I: Exactly! But Mark, as you well know, in the "Devadatta" chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, there's a girl who becomes a Buddha.¹⁵ All the Nichiren men either don't understand that chapter or interpret it differently. The majority of people say if you read it straight, it says a girl changed into a man and then the man transformed into a Buddha. But if you read it from the side of us women, before she changed into a man she offered the Buddha a jewel and the Buddha accepted it, didn't he? In terms of Buddhahood, that indicates she was a Buddha before she turned into a man. But because all of those gathered around could not accept it, she turned into a man to show them. That's how women think about it. But men can't accept that. They say she changed into a man. But recently, Ichikawa Sensei¹⁶ lectured that yes, she turned into a man, but that if you think that is a man in our sense, you're mistaken.

M: Sorry, could you say that again?

I: She turned into a man, but that "man" is not the man/woman of our human society.

M: [Not getting it.] I get it. Two truths.

I: Gender (*seibetsu*). He's saying that it's not the (world of) human man and woman. It's a Buddhist world's male. He said he imagined it's holding both, neither man nor woman, but something in between.... He said he couldn't understand it, but he taught us that it wasn't a human male. I thought, ahh, that's such a satisfactory explanation.

[I interrupt to confirm who she's talking about.]

I: We only know the world of humans, but if you think about the universe, then the world of Shakyamuni and all those Buddhas might be very different.

M: Since we see from unenlightened eyes...

I: It's not a human body, I guess. If you think of it that way, clearly you can say that. In that sense it's changing into a man. If you think of it that way, it's like ahh, I get it. If that's it a woman can accept it, I guess. But Mark, think about it. Isn't it odd? All men are born from women. If you say that women are impure, then all men are born of impurity. Isn't it an incredible insult to say your own birth is impure?

Ishida's exclamations that "ahh, she gets it" alongside her claim that as a woman, she can accept this interpretation, opens up a line of questioning I wish I had

15. For an excellent overview of gender in the *Lotus Sutra*, see NATTIER (2009).

16. Referring to 市川智康, a teacher at Ikegami Honmonji.

followed at the time. What are the things she cannot accept? What other things does she not get? What are the questions that women have that men cannot even imagine, let alone think to ask? How, as Ishida puts it, can the Buddhist view of women as impure not lead men to then consider their own impure origins? Her acceptance of Ichikawa's reading of the "Dragon Girl" story provides important clues. For Ishida, the relativizing of gender to the phenomenal world allows for the deeper, more profound understanding that such distinctions are meaningless.

Ishida's encounter with Ichikawa challenges overly simplistic representations of women working against a narrow-minded, establishment patriarchy. Ichikawa teaches at Ikegami Honmonji and thus speaks with the authority of the sectarian institution. Yet his teachings run counter to established interpretation. In Ishida's account, Ichikawa has given female priests the tools they need to make visible the androcentric fault lines of their tradition and to move past them to their own sense of truth. These interpretive strategies allow Ishida to invert canonical narratives that normalize women's inferior status. Of course, one could take a more cynical, false-consciousness view that Ishida's preferred reading of the *Lotus Sutra* offers women merely an illusion of equality or depth and that it actually changes nothing. But taking such a position would be to overlook how Ishida is utilizing this message throughout her life—in sermons, in talks to other women in her associations, and in discussions with female parishioners. It also fails to consider how this shift in understanding of the soteriological possibilities offered by her tradition provides her with a depth of faith and confidence that inflects every part of her life.

"I can't say these half-awake things."

Honda's experiences (wild childhood, divorce, working on her own, institutional misogyny, and taking over a temple in mid-life from scratch) have all made her the independent, outspoken priest she is today. They also help us to situate her ardent disagreement with the Pure Land tenet that all can be saved. When, after a rather intense back and forth on the subject, I asked her if she actually does not believe in universal salvation, she responded:

I'm saying people shouldn't be spoiled like that—don't sugarcoat it. There are countless assholes (*yatsu*) who'll just spout the *nenbutsu*. How many people in the world do you think actually repent from the bottom of their hearts? How many can actually diagnose their own stupidity? How many can self-analyze? I wonder if I'm just a realist. I can't say these half-awake things. [...] Of course there are people who cannot be saved. Look, this world came from not being able to be saved. This very world. So to then say at the stage of death you can be saved by a priest? That's just too indulgent (*amasugiru*). Fall into hell once and

then go from there. I'm not saying you won't be saved. I'm saying fall into hell and then see what you can do on your own. Experience it yourself—true suffering!

While her core belief in self-reliance is revealed quite clearly in her critiques of the fundamental teachings of her sect, Honda's take on female priests manifests in more subtle ways. One of Honda's recurring criticisms of other female priests centers on the pitch of their voices when they chant. For Honda, matching her voice to that of her male colleagues was something she worked on regularly; she had no time for priests whom she felt were simply lazy. When I asked her if she would consider taking a female priest as a successor for her own temple she was highly sceptical.

H: I wonder how a woman would do (as temple successor). First of all, if she has long hair, that's no good. If the abbot's head is shaved, an assistant priest (*yakuso*) with long hair won't work. Women usually have long hair, and they wear it in this way [demonstrating putting it back].

M: Like a ponytail?

H: It looks very secular. It doesn't look appropriate (*kirei*).

M: So a secular look is no good?

H: No. Women are the sex that have children, and I guess that makes them look secular.¹⁷ Let's suppose the priest is a man. If someone dear to you, a wife, mother, or father dies, and that priest shows up with a dyed-brown Mohawk, how would you feel?

M: [Laughing].

H: I also think that female priests (*niso-san*) are not making enough effort. They really need to make much more effort.

M: Female priests in general?

H: Yup. First of all, they need to work harder to train their voices. Female voices are one octave higher than male voices. It is the same note, only one octave higher. That's the only difference, but it doesn't sound good when you hear it. Female priests shouldn't (just put it down to being a woman). They are working in a male-dominated world, so naturally the sutra-chanting voice is a male voice. It is not possible for women to produce a low voice unless they train themselves. It is possible, however, if they train. I was able to do it. Even now, I train and practice every morning. If you do, then you can reach a low pitch that wasn't possible before. If you train to that degree, then you can produce the same sound as men and chant without any discomfort. If female priests want to take the same roles as male priests, they should work hard. Without making the necessary effort.... There are some terrible female priests. There are tons of terrible people (*hidoi hito ippai irun da yo*). There are many now

17. Though I translate it as "secular," the word Honda used throughout this part of our conversation was *zokuppoi*, which carries a derogatory tone and could, in a different context, be translated as "trashy."

who just can't do it. Forget that other stuff, I think that they should really train, starting from the basics. I think maybe female priests don't want to push that hard. There are many female priests who are married. When they are married, they cannot spend all their energy on their temple.

M: What about the men?

H: The men drink, eat, talk about money, and that's it [laughing].

Honda focuses her distaste on long, "secular" hair and connects it to what she sees as the inability of women who are mothers to do the job. By shaving her own head she demonstrates a commitment that they lack. While it may be tempting to read her disdain as a straightforward, gendered critique of women, it seems to me that her response stands in line with her general need to demonstrate her own *bona fides* in relation to other priests, be they male or female. Her critique of female priests comes less from a concern over gender than a long-standing frustration with priests who fail to put their money where their mouths are.

For her own part, Honda had shaved her head since we had last met. While a few years earlier, she wore a sort of Beatles cut, it had not been fully shaved. She told me that she shaved it because she wanted to be heart to heart with the Buddha (*jibun no kokoro ga hotokesama to mukiaitai naa to omotte*). Unlike when she had to shave her hair for the training hall, this time, she told me, it took true courage because she made a conscious choice. But when I asked if there was a particular reason why she had shaved it now, she turned not to Buddhist teachings or identity, but to her interactions with men in the business world.

H: You see, people look at this temple in a particular way because the abbot is a woman. Well, Japanese men think that things are easier for them with women. How should I explain...

M: Well?

H: I don't know how to explain...

M: You are taken lightly because you are a woman?

H: I feel they do. For example, they seem to think that I would favor them if they give me some presents. How can I express this in words? For business between men, one party asks the other to accept and agree to the offer. Then the other party says that the offer is too low, and if the offer is not more, it won't be accepted. Then, the original party offers a different amount and asks the other to accept. These interactions are normal between men. That is the kind of social norm for them, but they think that those norms might not be applicable to women. Then, they think about giving a present ... that kind of thinking. How should I say it? They sometimes bring cute things....

M: (They think) they'll get what they want just with that.

H: Yeah. They seem to think that if anything happens, women might become hysterical or panic easily.... How should I explain this to you....

M: Can you give me some concrete examples?

H: Yes, tons. They ask me what I like.... For example, they ask me if I drink alcoholic beverages, and if I say I drink, they bring me an extremely expensive bottle of wine. Or because they think I'll like it, they bring me high-ticket items. Sure there are women who like that sort of thing, but I don't want a wine because it's fancy. If there's a ten-dollar bottle of wine that's good, I'd want that.

M: I'm like that too.

H: You see? I don't need that vintage wine. Most likely, I wouldn't enjoy that kind of wine. And if someone tells me this grape juice is more delicious than that vintage wine, I'd much rather have the grape juice. However, men's thinking and business people are different. They think expensive things are better. They simply do not know me. I might like diamonds, but I also like a ring that you win at a night market.

M: A prize.

H: That's right. I think I prefer those things. But there are so many women who love diamonds, right? So, because these men don't understand me, they think that they should give me expensive things. Because I was born and lived all my life in a place like this (central Tokyo), they think that I know lots of expensive things. So if they give me those kinds of things, they think that I'd fall for them. They think that I'd okay whatever business plan they are putting forward?! Fat chance.

M: Do you think that they behave like that because you are a woman? Or, do you think that they do so because abbots of other temples in this (affluent) area want those things?

H: Yes, I think it is because I am a woman.

I have included the exchange at the beginning of this part of the conversation to highlight a moment where Honda was having difficulty explaining something to me simply because I was male. In fact, the actual back and forth over this went on much longer than is reflected above. At the time it struck me that if I were a woman, I would know exactly what she was talking about because I would have experienced similar treatment many times over. On the other hand, I believe there is something highly instructive in our difficulty in communicating what, for many female priests, would have required no explanation at all. Our difficulty in communication speaks volumes about the ways in which Buddhist women's stories bring to the forefront limits and boundaries that usually go unrecognized.

Beyond the institutional and doctrinal obstacles facing them, there are also ongoing societal expectations facing women. Honda repeatedly framed her head shaving in terms of facing the Buddha, but when pressed to point to a reason why she did it at this particular time, she turned to the need to counter societal

expectations—to make herself a priest first, not a woman, in the eyes of bankers and financiers. Honda’s conflation of secular and religious motivations for shaving her head and the way that gender plays out here in two registers (faith and business) should inform not only how we approach the study of female priests, but also Buddhism in general. Honda’s views on gender are no more isolatable or clearly defined than her views on doctrine. Both are part of a complex whole that must be contextualized within an individual life history, a temple community, the larger world of temple Buddhism, and Japanese society in the early twenty-first century. Her views on the capabilities of female priests, though gendered, are part and parcel of her views of priests in general, male priests included. Just as a study of contemporary doctrine needs to be both localized and situated against broader institutional and cultural backdrops, so too does an exploration of gender in contemporary Japanese Buddhism require attention to those things that are unique to Buddhist women and also those that are experienced by the vast majority of all priests.

Part of my concern with some studies of female priests is that they tend to artificially isolate female Buddhist experiences. For example, Monika Schrimpf has argued that ordained Buddhist women are characterized in part by their lack of a clearly defined role because they “may be married and have their own families. They may be the head priestess of a temple, the wife of a temple priest, or work in a temple. They may live according to Buddhist precepts in private, or have secular jobs” (SCHRIMPF 2015, 184). How is this any different from the variety of roles an ordained Buddhist male might take? What is gained by this sort of attempt to qualify pervasive aspects of Japanese Buddhist identity as uniquely characteristic of female experience? My point is not to denigrate what is in many ways important research, but to advocate for approaches that go beyond isolating Buddhist women. I would argue that it is both those aspects of a Japanese Buddhist women’s experiences that are ubiquitous among contemporary Japanese Buddhists and the particulars of the Buddhism they encounter that makes their stories so essential to enriching our understanding.

Conclusion

One of the dangers of these isolating frameworks is they tend to extend that isolation to questions of personal motivation. In the *ganbare*/experimental Buddhism approach noted above, male priests are portrayed as innovative and outward looking. My concern is that existing studies of female priests, in an attempt to mark what makes them distinct, tend to focus narrowly on faith. All of the women Schrimpf introduces seem primarily motivated by faith. Paula Arai’s work on Sōtō nuns similarly focuses on the reservoirs of faith that have led them to where they are (ARAI 1999). Looking at temple women with an eye

to issues such as temple succession offers a messier view of how these women have come to where they are and, in that messiness, forces us toward a more comprehensive framework for situating their lives and their faith. Do female Buddhists not deserve the same right as their male counterparts to be railroaded into their current situations? Is Horimoto's position as a vocal and self-reliant assistant priest any less valid because she was forced into it? Is Honda's version of self-powered (*jiriki*) Jōdo less significant because she was essentially duped into taking over by the local priests who played on her personal pride and grandfather's legacy? Is Ishida's adoption of a gender-positive reading of the *Lotus Sutra* less believable because of her early reluctance to take over her temple? And what do these responses, all entirely in line with the unconventional paths so many temple priests' lives follow, tell us about changes in people over time? Faith is practiced. Faith develops. Faith disappears and then pops up in other ways.

Nor do other identity markers exist in advance of lived experience. Accounts by Honda, Horimoto, and Ishida are not easily divided into feminist or not, victim or not, egalitarian or not. Horimoto's desire to invite young wives out of their temples is tempered by an understanding of gendered social roles and face-saving. Ishida's dismay at entering a male-dominated Buddhist world she found largely abhorrent did not keep her from leading her son down that same path. Though she finds solace in the true meaning of the dragon girl's transformation, the fact that she constantly encounters Nichiren men who do not, indicates that her efforts may do little to transform the cultural and institutional realities facing Buddhist women, at least in the near future. Honda's resistance to choosing a female successor for her own temple suggests that she has fully internalized the normative misogyny of temple Buddhism, but her statements about the quality of male priests in general tell us there is much more going on.

We need to situate Buddhist women in broader contexts. We should not treat them as exemplars of gender studies, but rather as everyday priests with particular sets of concerns. They may register gender concerns, but that is not solely how they wish to be viewed. In terms of women and Japanese Buddhism, we need to do more than simply cite Saba Mahmood. How can we best identify and explore the many forms that female Buddhist agency might take? Native ethnographies are an essential part of the answer, but scholars could also do more collaborative work with the priests themselves. I have been asking priests to keep diaries and record thoughts, however mundane, on their daily lives and practices. My hope is that we can then dialogue in a way that allows them to work through and describe their experiences in ways that I cannot. What does it mean to focus on women's voices? What does it mean to allow them space to tell their own stories? What does Buddhism sound like in their stories? In their voices? In their register?

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