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Editors' Introduction

Gendering Religious Practices in Japan Multiple Voices, Multiple Strategies

THIS SPECIAL issue represents a combination of efforts by Japanese and Canadian scholars in such fields as traditional Buddhism, Christianity, Japanese mountain religion, new religions, and spirituality. The contributors' aim is to approach their subjects critically from a gender perspective and perform an examination or analysis in light of their criticism or their reframing of interpretations that have been accepted as standard.

As Kobayashi argues in this special issue, the image of women as actors in religious history has been romanticized. In other words, attention has focused mainly on women of exceptionally heroic quality, and the images of those women have been amplified, in an attempt to overturn the image of women as sacrificial victims of oppression. An approach that seeks to substantiate the agency of women in this way, however, can only be futile. Consider, for example, the body of past studies on Japanese women and Buddhist history. This research has illuminated the existence of women, both priestly renunciates and lay practitioners, who had never before been recognized on the public stage of history, and it has shown how, despite the constraints imposed by their times, women have independently and actively engaged in religious activity. Folklore research has also been carried out with the aim of presenting women's place in religion in terms of their spiritual power. It is true that studies of this kind have contributed to the advances made in research on women in Japanese religion. It is also true, however, that in placing their emphasis on accounting for women's

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energy and spiritual power, these studies have excessively romanticized women's roles in religion in Japan, and they have mainly failed to place women in relation to the woman-excluding ways of thinking and patriarchal mechanisms that (must have) existed in the background (KAWAHASHI 2005). It is also troubling that research on Japanese women and religion from this perspective is still considered valid in the study of history, folklore, and religion. Moreover, there is a significant tendency to credulously situate any and all research that takes women as the main topic, as well as all research conducted by scholars who are women, as gender research. As KING (2005) declares, however, the word "gender" is not synonymous with "woman." Nevertheless, the present situation is that the woman's perspective and the gender perspective are commonly equated uncritically one with the other.

At the real-world locus of their activity in religion, women face a range of conflicts and difficulties that arise from gender discrimination and androcentrism. However, these problems are treated as the women's personal problems, thereby rendering them invisible. This special issue pursues a reexamination by directly addressing the idealized image of women in religion from critical perspectives in terms of the interpretation of Japanese women and religion, a topic that has been widely studied since the 1980s. We hope to shed new light where previous research has not adequately grasped the complexity of diverse problems involved in women's practice of religion in Japan. Our purpose in this is not to concentrate solely on activities seeking a radical gender equality, but to conduct multi-perspective explorations of the possibilities for reform and transformation that emerge out of women's everyday challenges and negotiations.¹

Theoretical Background

Religion is ambiguously significant for women in that it represents both liberation and bondage. On the one hand, religion excludes women, and on the other it is understood to be trying to include women. Women are regarded as though they are symbolic reservoirs of the unique spiritual essence of their ethnic groups and nationalities, and debates on the rights and wrongs of such practices as the veil and suttee have therefore grown complicated. As NARAYAN (1997) points out, however, there are instances of Western feminists who avoid

1. An item on sources on gender and religion in Japan can be found in volume III of Lucia DOLCE's anthology (2012), but it is somewhat thin in terms of quantity. The introduction to the recent special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Japan* on "Gender Issues in Modern and Contemporary Religions in Japan" (*JRJ*, volume 4, issue 2-3) by SCHRIMPF and SONNTAG (2015) is useful for its systematic presentation of the basic literature in this area. The *JRJ* special issue is built on the foundation of a 2015 panel at the IAHR in which both Kawahashi and Kobayashi took part. For more on religion and gender in Okinawa, see KAWAHASHI (2017).

any negative view or moral criticism of non-Western women and cultures for fear of being accused of racism or colonialism, and who take a stance of cultural relativism for that reason.

These issues have grown more difficult to untangle in recent years due to trends in the interpretation of Japanese religion and women by religion scholars in Europe and America. With regard to the self-perception of Buddhist nuns in present-day Japan, for example, women priests are subordinated to male priests in terms of their position and their role in the ritual context, but the recognition that women as religionists perform a function unique to women has gained a certain currency even among Western scholars of Japanese religion. The notion of gender roles performed on the basis of an internalization of patriarchy can also serve women as a strategy of self-affirmation to some extent. There is an understanding, therefore, that some advantage is actually to be gained for women by performing in their gender roles, but this understanding still requires sampling from more specific cases to substantiate it. We may wonder to what extent this strategy, with its limitations, has enabled women to raise objections that were not previously allowed them. We may also wonder to what extent or in what way the awareness by men of women's self-understanding and self-realization can influence men or make them conscious of change. This is a matter that needs further clarification.

Another issue is the attitude shown by some scholars of taking non-Western women under their wing, as though somehow acting as those women's patron, and there is a danger that such attitudes may in effect constitute complicity in maintaining patriarchal religious structures. It is also the case that when scholars from other countries present research that vindicates the patriarchal practices of some religious group in Japan, that research ends up as toxic fuel for that community's gender discriminatory system, keeping the system in operation. In other words, when their work states that a new religion is bringing salvation to women, who are in the very bottom strata, or when they declare that there is no gender discrimination in Buddhism, or when they disseminate other such conventional androcentric interpretations, there is a real possibility that these scholars are rendering invisible the oppression and exploitation that women are being subjected to by patriarchal religion, and that they are marginalizing women's resistance.²

Even as we eliminate the depiction of women as the pitiful victims of patriarchy who go to religion for succor, it is also necessary to deliberately perform

2. The text on Japanese women and religion from ancient times to the present written by Barbara Ambros in the form of a historical survey is one example. She concludes that throughout the history of religion, Japanese women have been "radiant suns rather than moons reflecting the brilliance of others" (AMBROS 2015, 172). Although we wish to give credit where it is due for an attempt of this kind, the result still lacks critical focus on unequal gender relations (KAWAHASHI 2016c). Other reviews of the Ambros book include MURAYAMA (2016) and KIM (2016).

a critical analysis of the various authorities and discriminatory hierarchies that oppress women, but without romanticizing women as actors against repression. That is, it is important to see how women are working on the environment around themselves in the effort to alter their own difficult circumstances, but without putting them in the role of powerless victims. The point is not to paint women's choices and behavior in overly glorious colors. Instead, we must take constant care to perceive how these women's efforts at resistance and struggle could also be pushing them into authority structures and relationships determined largely by power.

Morny Joy, the feminist scholar of religion from Canada who the guest editors respect greatly, has pointed out that religion has been drawn into a tendency to generate a backlash against women's rights in the name of tradition or culture. She has described the dangers of a stance that gives the superficial appearance of respect for the cultural differences and identity of an other (JOY 2008, 188–94). Joy has stated that research in religion today must correctly perceive and account for the complex interactions between religion and rights that are surfacing in different places in present-day society as women's human rights (JOY 2008; 2013). We agree. As Alison Boden has observed, too, women who practice religion and are at the same time respected for their worth as women are to be found in every religious culture. In other words, the issues of women's rights and religious commitment are not mutually contradictory. Those women are not seeking to renounce religion and repudiate it. They want to dismantle the oppression and unfairness that androcentrism has instilled in religion. These are two different things, and they must be rigorously distinguished from each other (BODEN 2007, xi).

Our particular aim in this special issue is to provide in-depth accounts of initiatives for reform or resistance as pursued by women in the real-world contexts of their own actions. These women too often tend to be made invisible in debates over ideologies and interpretations, such as those referred to above. The purpose, therefore, is to examine the circumstances of these women as religious actors, whether that examination is based on in-depth fieldwork or, as in the articles contained within this volume by Kawahashi and Miki, it is done from the first-person perspective of the women concerned.

Women in religion are placed on the periphery of religious communities. It is for this very reason that women are able to present such exacting perspectives on the fraudulence, unfairness, and foolishness found in the center, in the institution, and in the authority. This special issue will make this clear.

Religion and Feminist Movements

When looking at feminist movements in Japanese religious circles, they must of course be placed in the whole context of Japanese feminist movements and the

course of gender equality in Japanese society. As suggested also in Rowe's article in this volume, this is because an examination of religion and gender in Japan that looks only to interpretations found in the religious community can provide only a partial explanation of what is there. Even though religious circles are trailing behind society at large in matters of changing gender awareness, there are movements in Japan today of women in religion who face up to gender discrimination as their own problem, who voice their protests, and who struggle for reform in the religious community. One pioneering effort in this regard was the "Feminism, Religion, and Peace Group" (フェミニズム・宗教・平和の会) led by the late Okuda Akiko 奥田暁子 and Okano Haruko 岡野治子 with the publication of the journal *Womanspirit* over a seventeen-year period starting in 1986.

This group was formed in Tokyo with participation largely by Christian women, but members who were interested in Buddhism and who met each other through the group eventually decided to start up their own network as well. From 1996 to 1997, women in the Tokai and Kanto regions who were the spouses of priests, women priests, or both, as well as Buddhist women who were not members of any specific religious community, joined in founding the nonsectarian Tokai Network for Women and Buddhism (女性と仏教東海ネットワーク) and the Kanto Network for Women and Buddhism (女性と仏教関東ネットワーク) in their respective areas. These networks are engaged in rereading conventionally androcentric Buddhist history and doctrine in light of the members' own experience as women and their aim is to present a reimagined vision of Buddhism. In this sense, their activities align in part with the cooperative efforts by Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women in the feminist theology movement to overcome traditional gender discrimination in Judaeo-Christian religions. The women gained awareness in themselves that the gender discrimination they experience directly as present in their everyday lives is not something separate from the institutions they deal with, but is structured as part of those institutions. This is the recognition, well-known in the history of feminist movements, that the personal is political. The women came to realize the importance of linking together and voicing their protests themselves in order to resolve this issue of discrimination.³ Many network members who belong to the Shin School community are also closely involved with the Association of Women to Consider Discrimination Against Women in the Ōtani Faction of the Shin School (真宗大谷派における女性差別を考えるおんなたちの会). This Association of Women, as it is commonly referred to, was organized in 1986 to put pressure on the

3. Kawahashi and Kobayashi, the editors of this special issue of the *JRS*, are key members of these networks. To date, three volumes of collected women's studies on Buddhism and gender jointly edited by the two networks have been published (see JOSEI TO BUKKYŌ TŌKAI KANTŌ NETTOWĀKU 1999; 2004; 2011).

executive body of the Shin School to revise gender discriminatory provisions governing their religious community. Now, three decades later, this group has over four hundred members. The Tokai and Kanto networks and this Association of Women do not appoint representatives, directors, or chairs. Their only officers are women who share work as coordinators and advisors on a rotating basis. This is a spontaneous manifestation of the principle of “Nobody represents anybody. Nobody is represented by anybody,” that can be found in feminist movements (NAKANISHI and UENO 2003, 107).

It is important to note here that 1986 was also the year when the Feminism, Religion, and Peace Group, noted above, was founded. Looking back at the time of this group’s formation, Okuda Akiko wrote that “Feminism had already stopped being an object of derision and ridicule by 1986, but in the world of religion, feminism was still viewed as something novel” (FEMINISM, RELIGION, AND PEACE GROUP 2002, 36). The year before that, in 1985, Japan had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and passed the Act on Equal Employment Opportunities for Men and Women. This was also the year of the Japan conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, among other events, making it a landmark year in the history of feminism in Japan. Compared to society at large, however, conditions in Japan’s religious circles did not show the kind of improvement that might have been anticipated, as Miki and Kawahashi argue in this special issue.

Men in religion have criticized movements by women seeking gender equality, saying that this manifests a lack of faith by the women. In other words, they take the biased view that feminism and faith are mutually exclusive and essentially irreconcilable. In doing what they are doing, these women are aware that they will not be accepted by the men of the religious community so long as what they affirm is not expressed as “a vision of what religion should properly be” and expressed primarily in terms of faith. It is also the case, however, that if the women were to emphasize the aspect of their own particular religious faith to such an extent that their movement became exclusive in a sectarian sense, then they would end up estranging themselves from the experiences and concerns of women in society at large. In other words, the women are under pressure to limit their movement to matters of their faith, but when limited in that way, they will fail to speak to women of other faiths or no particular faith. This is, in fact, one reason that general or secular feminist movements do not take very much interest in the women’s movements in religion.

Another factor that complicates matters for feminist movements in religious circles is the androcentrism that is deeply embedded in the collectivity of scholarship on religion. Much of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (日本宗教学会) is made up of scholars who also belong to various religious groups and scholars who take particular religious communities as their field of

study. Many of these scholars tend to disfavor criticism of the religious communities in which they themselves have a stake. Most of them are men, and what they feel the greatest aversion to and wish to avoid above all is anything relating to gender discrimination in the religious community. For example, a certain Buddhist priest who is a sociologist of religion and who has been a managing director of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, as well as a member of the board of the International Institute for the Study of Religions, wrote as described below in words suffused with archetypal misogyny and the intent to belittle feminism.

Resisting the Backlash

This man is a renowned sociologist of religion, and has written what could be termed classic feminism bashing in the pages of the *Chugai Nippō* 中外日報, a religious affairs newspaper. What he says is essentially that even though men today have shorter average lifespans than women and therefore clearly lead harder lives, there are entirely too many women in the world espousing feminist views, as though women are the vulnerable ones. In other words, this priest declared in the religion-oriented media that it is men who are truly socially disadvantaged, not women.⁴ It is surprising that this priest, though a sociologist, was unaware of how low Japan ranks in gender equality. On the global gender gap index reported by the World Economic Forum, for example, Japan places at the bottom of the seven leading nations, and its ranking slipped even lower from 101st place to 111th in 2016. The fact is that this male scholar—who refused to recognize that women have a disadvantaged position even within the religious community—was not an anomaly, and there were (and are still) many scholars who actually agreed with him. The important point here is that discussion of the issues of women and religion in Japan must not be cut off from their present-day political context. This is one example of how Japan today is being swept by a storm of backlash against gender equality.

Sometime after the year 2000, the sense of crisis over the mounting egregiousness of this backlash came to be recognized as a problem. Miura Mari 三浦まり, a political scientist researching the low position of women in Japan's political circles, finds in her analysis that the backlash reached its height, conversely, after the number of women Diet members increased midway into the year 2000, and Japanese measures for gender equality stalled around that time. The core of the backlash included attacks on women's sexual independence, efforts to enforce stereotypically limited gender roles, abandonment of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, and amendment of Article 24 of the Constitution

4. See ŌMURA (2012). For a penetrating critique of this work by a male reviewer, see NUMAZAKI (2012).

(which provides for the essential equality of men and women) with changes for the worse (MIURA 2016). As Inose relates in this special issue, among the bodies that advocated these kinds of things were the Japan Conference (日本会議), the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership (神道政治連盟), and the Unification Church (統一教会) (see also KAWAHASHI 2016b). The article by Komatsu in this special issue also indicates how the assault on feminism gave many women in Japan the feeling that they were under siege.

Members of the media, public administrators, educators, and other people in similar positions disseminated distorted views of gender equality and feminist principles in a trend that provoked a backlash against “feminism” in various different sectors of Japanese society. The Women’s Studies Association of Japan (日本女性学会) responded to this movement by issuing a statement in 2005 to affirm very clearly that:

Activities to pull the teeth of the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (to degrade its content), to blacklist books on gender matters, and other such activities constitute violations of academic freedom and a betrayal of the wisdom that people have accumulated both internationally and domestically. The English translation of *danjo kyōdo sankaku* (男女共同参画) [literally “joint participation by men and women”] is “gender equality,” which suggests how impossible it is to speak and think about equality between the sexes without employing the concept of gender. The presence of the concept of gender has already become an international norm, and if a decision is somehow made to stop using this concept in Japan, then not only will Japan become unable to make any meaningful academic communication to the world, but this country will no doubt become an object of scorn and derision.

(WOMEN’S STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF JAPAN,
GENDER STUDIES GROUP, ed., 2005)

The androcentrism of scholarly associations for religious studies in Japan has already been observed in detail by Kawahashi, Komatsu, and Kuroki. Their main point is about the associations’ rejection of proposals that a system of quotas for raising gender diversity matters in the associations be adopted. Another point they make is that the homosocial structure of the associations has been a barrier to women, making it difficult for younger women scholars, in particular, to obtain full-time positions (KAWAHASHI, KOMATSU, and KUROKI 2013). Kawahashi has also written about the existence of a double standard, seen in the tendency of some male religion scholars in Japan to act as though they recognize and support Japanese women scholars and gender research when those men are at the AAR, the IAHR, and other such international conferences, but then do not necessarily offer that same recognition when they are in Japan (KAWAHASHI 2014). This kind of gender sensibility in scholarly associations stands in

stark contrast to what we find in the AAR. This is because the AAR already has a fully established Committee on the Status of Women that organizes workshops to support women who are members of sexual, ethnic, and racial minorities, and runs projects that provide women scholars with assistance on work-life balance and employment, among other such activities.⁵

In addition to this gender inequality that presently exists in Japanese society at large as well as in academic circles related to religious studies, there are the unfortunate phenomena of anti-feminist movements gaining prominence in various parts of the world. Considering these circumstances, we can only affirm that criticism from gender perspectives is now even more valid, and more necessary, than it was before. It was fourteen years ago that the *JJRS* published a special edition on “Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan” with Kawahashi and Kuroki as guest editors (*JJRS*, vol. 30/3–4, 2003). The present special issue, however, gives even greater emphasis to critical examination of the structure of religious communities and the consciousness of people in religion as contextualization of the religious subjecthood of Japanese women. The reason is that this time, the editors feel a sense of crisis over the way that religion is being swallowed up by the patriarchal institutions of present-day Japan. In this issue, therefore, Rowe observes perceptively that women Buddhists are being denied participation in speech by popular Buddhists, and criticizes this exclusion. It is time for this kind of “gender-critical turn” to become more widely adopted in the study of Japanese religion.⁶

5. One noteworthy advance that was made recently in the Japanese Association for Religious Studies is the decision to take part in the Japan Liaison Committee for Promoting Gender Equality in Social Science and Humanities Societies (人文社会科学系諸学会男女共同参画連絡会), a federation formed across a variety of humanities fields. Association representatives have been appointed to participate in the liaison activities. Women make up only 14 percent of scholars and researchers in Japan, which is the lowest level to be found in economically developed countries, and the Liaison Committee was created to improve the situation. At the time this decision to take part was made, the president of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies was Inoue Nobutaka 井上順孝, and we are deeply grateful to him for his cooperation.

6. This expression was coined by KING (2004, 2). Scholars of Buddhist studies in Europe and America have produced quality research that incorporates gender perspectives; see, for example, STARLING (2013) and HEIDEGGER (2010). For work by younger scholars in Japan, see for example YOKOI (2016). The BARC Research Center for Buddhist Cultures in Asia (アジア仏教文化研究センター) at Ryukoku University has, thanks to the understanding of enlightened male scholars of Buddhism at that center, held numerous events such as workshops on the eight practices of courtesy for nuns (*hakkyō hō* 八敬法), to which women priests were invited, and specialized symposiums on Buddhism and gender, and so on. Kawahashi and Rowe have both presented their work at such occasions. There is also the International Ladies Association of Buddhism (ILAB 国際仏教婦人会), which was founded by a group of women Buddhists that is based in the Kōdō Kyōdan 孝道教団, a religious community in the lineage of the Tendai School. ILAB activities include lecture meetings to which it has invited women political leaders from other countries and screenings

In Conclusion

After the Great East Japan earthquake, religionists had many opportunities to become involved in memorials for the dead and pastoral care for the survivors of the tragedy. Studies of these matters also became prevalent. As a result, scholars of religion and religionists in Japan, primarily men, have been appearing in the media in the role of public intellectuals, and there has been a growing tendency to discuss the contributions that religionists make in society and the role of religion as a public good. We find these discourses to be lacking in gender perspectives as well as in criticism of the gender discrimination found in religious circles in Japan, and we want to make the point that discussion of the public good and the public character of religion should also explicitly acknowledge the exclusion and oppression that have characterized the religious community's treatment of its vulnerable members (KAWAHASHI 2016a). The positions and perspectives of scholars of Japanese religion are being questioned more than ever before. We will close by observing emphatically that when scholars discuss Japanese religion and women, they will be called on to self-reflexively address the questions of where they are speaking from, who they are speaking to, and for what purpose they are speaking, as well as of how they are being read, by whom, and where.⁷

[Translated by Richard Peterson]

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7. Regarding this self-reflexive questioning by the scholar, SHIMODA's critical review (2016) of Shimazono's text on contemporary Buddhism and ethics suggests numerous possibilities.

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