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Women Challenging the “Celibate” Buddhist Order Recent Cases of Progress and Regress in the Sōtō School

This article will discuss the tension between the principle of celibacy (professed renunciation of secular life) and the fact of marriage by male priests in the Sōtō School. Although one hundred and forty-five years have passed since the government edict of 1872 that recognized marriage by Buddhist clergymen under secular law in Japan, this thorny problem is still far from being resolved, and has instead become a field of contention with many varied voices. This study examines recent developments with particular attention to detail of public hearings held on the temple wife problem. The Sōtō order established a forum for public hearings on the temple wife problem at its administrative headquarters (*shūmuchiō*). In a series of sessions held over a five-year period starting in 2006, the spouses of priests presented their views to the forum, voicing their anger, apprehension, and criticisms regarding the present state of the Sōtō School. In concluding, I argue that gender equality movements in the Buddhist orders must seek the involvement of women and men who hold themselves apart from gender problems, and engage tenaciously in dialogue to reach a shared awareness of the problem.

KEYWORDS: temple wives—*jizoku*—Sōtō School—celibacy—Jōdo Shin School—women’s networking—traditional Buddhist orders—gender equality

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THE MAIN problems facing traditional Buddhist temples today are commonly associated with the real state of crisis in Japan that results from a population that is shrinking and aging while also shifting away from certain rural communities, so that temples there face the possibility of actually becoming extinct. As a national average, the percentage of temples that belong to rural or provincial localities and that could cease to exist is reported to be over 30 percent (SAKURAI and KAWAMATA 2016). The media coverage of these phenomena, however, tends to overshadow and conceal another, more fundamental and more critical problem. This article will discuss that problem, which is the tension between the principle of celibacy (professed renunciation of secular life, *shukke shugi* 出家主義) and the fact of marriage by male priests in the Sōtō School. This is the largest traditional Buddhist order in Japan, having approximately 14,500 temples and over 16,000 priests.

Formulating the Problem

The traditional Buddhist orders in Japan today (with the exception of the Jōdo Shin School, which will be discussed later) still describe themselves as renunciate orders that profess celibacy as a fundamental principle, and it is a fact that marriage by priests is not officially recognized as a part of their religious activities. Even though many priests are married, the actuality of their situation is concealed by their professed adherence to the precepts as a matter of doctrine. This is a phenomenon that I have termed “fictitious celibacy,” and I have argued that the order should take self-admonitory notice of how its celibacy-in-principle has undermined the reality of temple life (KAWAHASHI 1995; 2003; 2012a). This also involves an issue of gender inequality in that it forces the male priests’ female spouses, commonly referred to as *jizoku* 寺族, into an ambiguous position and renders them powerless. I have emphasized that this is not a marital problem that should be resolved within an individual temple, but rather a serious issue that relates directly to how the Buddhist order perceives gender itself. It has been over one hundred and forty-five years since the government edict of 1872 that recognized marriage and meat-eating by Buddhist clergymen under secular law in Japan, but this thorny problem is still far from being resolved. It has become instead an area of contention with competing voices.

* This article overlaps in part with chapter 4 (*Joseitachi no chosen* 女性たちの挑戦) of KAWAHASHI (2012b).

This problem of priestly marriage was the subject of a comprehensive study by JAFFE (2001). It has also begun to attract interest from other Western scholars in more recent years (COVELL 2005, 109–39; CHILSON 2012, 63–64).

The late NAKAMURA Ikuo (2011, 161) observed that the official edict releasing priests from vows of celibacy and dietary constraints was brought into practice piecemeal, as though in easily digestible chunks, but without ever being subjected to comprehensive debate from the perspectives of ordinary priests and lay believers as rooted in their own life circumstances. He summed this up not so much as the modernization of Japanese Buddhism or its casting off of the precepts as much as an actual transformation of Japanese Buddhism into something resembling the Shin School. For temple priests, NAKAMURA says, this remains “a major taboo that they are strongly reluctant to mention even now” (2011, 277). In July 2011, a male priest of the Sôtô School actually brought suit against Eiheiji, one of the head monastery temples of that school, declaring that marriage was a major offense against the precepts, and that in neglecting to instruct the priesthood accordingly, Eiheiji was neglecting its fundamental responsibility of training priests. The Fukui District Court cited freedom of religion and dismissed the suit. The priest-oriented monthly journal *Jimonkôryû* thereupon surveyed experts in the various sects and schools and asked for comments both for and against on the question of priestly marriage (*Jimonkôryû*, December 2011, 14–25). In fact, I was one of those surveyed. The *Jimonkôryû* questionnaire contained a question as to whether the respondent’s religious order has any provisions regarding marriage by priests (such as the prohibition of such marriage) as part of that order’s constitutional prescriptions or regulations. The editorial staff also asked how the respondent would answer questions from lay followers about whether marriage by priests was right or wrong. The Sôtô School, which was also a party to this suit, responded with the extremely terse statement that, “there are no rules that regulate marriage in particular” (*Jimonkôryû*, December 2011, 6). Some respondents, including members of the Sôtô School as well as all of the other orders, even replied that there are no prohibitions regarding marriage, that there are no doctrinal problems in this regard, either, but rather that the wives of priests make important contributions within their temples. However, these responses merely acknowledge the fact of marriage to the outside world in light of the reality that the women who are spouses of priests have long since become indispensable to temple administration. The responses do not appear to have emerged from self-scrutiny by priests regarding the question of marriage, nor from their consideration of the treatment given the women who are priests’ spouses. In other words, while they acknowledge the fact of priestly marriage to the outside world, they remain unable to affirm the fact of marriage within their orders. These responses therefore represent a double standard that is applied differently internally and externally.

In this article I will take up developments in the Sōtō School that have occurred since my 2003 study, with particular attention to public hearings held on the temple wife problem. The Sōtō order established a forum for public hearings on the temple wife problem at its administrative headquarters (*shūmuchō* 宗務庁). In a series of sessions held over a five-year period starting in 2006, women who are the spouses of priests presented their views to the forum. I took part in every one of this series of hearings, and I heard the anger, apprehension, and criticism voiced by many temple wives regarding the present state of the Sōtō School as they spoke about the way temple wives were positioned as religious educators, the ways they were treated after the death of the temple heads who were their spouses, and other such matters. The women called on the order to face up to the fact that in their capacity as priests' spouses, temple wives make a real contribution to temple administration. The women's insistence on this point demonstrated a commonality of feeling that astonished me. There were matters that these women had entertained doubts about or had felt were unfair up to that point, and yet they had felt unwilling or unable to talk about them. What was significant was that now these matters had become things that were all right for them to say, and these women therefore showed a new recognition that they themselves had the right to voice criticism of the religious order.

Historical Background

A brief overview of how the Sōtō School has placed the problem of priests' wives must look back to 1885, when the *Sōtō School Constitutional Prescriptions* (*Sōtōshū shūsei* 曹洞宗宗制) was approved as a compilation of regulations relating to this religious order. That text contained a provision that prohibited women from lodging in temples. In 1905, the *Sōtō School Constitution* (*Sōtōshū shūken* 曹洞宗宗憲) became the first such constitution to be adopted by this school. However, this constitution and the new constitutional prescriptions that were issued had the provisions relating to marriage deleted from them. The rationale for this has been that marriage by priests had become so common that argument over the right and wrong of it had become irrelevant, and the order had therefore chosen to drop the issue from that point on (MIYAJI 2008, 321). When the constitution was amended in 1995, an attempt was made to define the spouse of a priest under a heading of its own. The heading of *jizoku* (a term that is generally used to refer to temple wives, and so is largely rendered here in English as “temple wife,” although the Japanese term does not literally signify anything more than temple kindred or temple group) was added anew as chapter 8 of this constitution. This was a signature point of these amendments, coming after a forty-year hiatus. Up to 1995, there had been headings for “priest” (*sōryo* 僧侶) and “lay followers” (*danshinto* 檀信徒), but the heading for *jizoku*, of which spouses of male

priests are the main constituents, had been dropped from the constitution. The text of the newly added provision was, “persons other than priests who follow the religious tenets of this school and who reside in a temple are called *jizoku*.” This vague definition avoids referring to the marital relationship and constitutes a desperate attempt to uphold the claim that male priests, by not having wives, are observing the precepts as renunciates of secular life (KAWAHASHI 2003; KAWAHASHI and KUROKI 2004, 76–79).

Further attempts to revise the definition of *jizoku* were subsequently considered in policy working groups and other such bodies formed by Sôtō order council members. Although some motions were made toward an explicit definition of the position of temple wife, and some efforts were made to protect their spousal status, there were no signs of willingness to open up a doctrinal debate on celibacy itself. What appears, instead, is a tendency to position the women who are temple wives not as the spouses of priests so much as workers who contribute to the operation of the temple.

A tendency has long been observed among ordinary lay followers to not necessarily place importance on a priest being unmarried (SÔTÔSHÛ SÔGÔ KENKYÛ SENTĀ 2008, 413). This resembles the situation in the present-day Roman Catholic Church in America, where even though believers do not consider it so important for male clergy to maintain their unmarried state, church authority continues to treat celibacy as an important point of doctrine. Nakamura Ikuo, cited above, remarked that the roles once expected of priests as scholars, physicians, counselors, and so on have become highly specialized in present-day society, so that “areas of endeavor that can only be specially pursued in temples or by priests have virtually disappeared.” In light of this, he argued that the public today is not interested in the marital status of a priest and does not care whether he is single or married (NAKAMURA 2011, 188). This may be the reason, however, that the principle of secular renunciation and celibacy is something the priestly members of the Sôtō order find so fundamental to their own identity that they cannot give it up.

The Temple Wife in the Institution

The Sôtō School conducts a comprehensive census and attitude survey of all its temples at ten-year intervals (*Sôtōshū shūsei sōgō chōsa* 曹洞宗宗勢総合調査). The latest reports based on the 2005 survey present some figures that characterize the situation of temple wives in the present Sôtō order. As of 2005, for example, there were 3,356 wives of former head priests, 8,971 wives of head priests, and 1,510 wives of sub-priests. The average age in these three groups was 77.9, 55.8, and 37.9 years, respectively. In terms of education, 48.5 percent of head priests’ wives and 65.1 percent of sub-priests’ wives had graduated from junior college or higher,

indicating that the number of temple wives with higher education was increasing. However, the percentage with occupations other than temple administration and household work is 10 percent in the case of wives of head priests, and 18.7 percent for wives of sub-priests. When they do have other occupations, the majority are kindergarten staff or teachers. Considering the large number of miscellaneous duties that they perform in their temples, it is no wonder that even women with higher education do not find opportunities to work outside the temple. Another characteristic of these women is that 52.1 percent of them come from lay households rather than temple families.

I will look now at how this religious order, operating under its various constraints, has positioned the wives of male priests and how it has sought to protect them. The Sōtō School has a separate program of ordination called temple wife ordination (*jizoku tokudo* 寺族得度). This is a special ordination program that is neither the ordination (*tokudo* 得度) intended for priests nor the acceptance of precepts (*jukai* 受戒) intended for lay followers, and so it raises complex issues. Chapter 2 (Ordination for *Jizoku*) in the section on rules for temple wives in the *Sōtō School Constitutional Prescriptions* prescribes that a *jizoku* aged ten years or older shall be able to “receive ordination under the chief abbots or former chief abbots of the two head monastery temples.” As of 2011, a total of 15,733 people had received temple wife (*jizoku*) ordination.

Then chapter 3 (Sub-teacher [*junkyōshi* 准教師], and so on) relates that a person who has received this temple wife ordination and who completes a temple wife correspondence course prescribed by the religious order shall be eligible, upon application by the head priest, for appointment as a subteacher. As of 2011, a total of 7,990 people were subteachers. The report of the 2005 attitude survey identifies a markedly distinctive change in this regard: where the number of temple wives with subteacher qualifications had been no more than 33.3 percent of the total in the 1995 survey, a decade later the figure had risen to 46.3 percent. On the other hand, it also points out that there are temple wives who do not have time to receive temple wife ordination or to take correspondence courses (SŌTŌSHU SHŪMUCHŌ 2008, 45–46).

Obtaining these qualifications ultimately requires obtaining the consent of the head priest, who is the temple wife’s husband. The fact is, however, that there are head priests who either see no need for temple wives to acquire qualifications or do not want them to do so. It is also the case that the Sōtō School is a religious order in the Zen lineage, which places great emphasis on training in the monastery. This means that it is no simple matter for a woman who has been a temple wife to acquire the qualifications of a Buddhist priest. There has been an emerging problem, therefore, of temple wives who have ended up being forced to leave their temple against their will after the head priest dies. Regardless of how greatly the wives have contributed to the administration of the temple up to

that point, this can happen to them if they do not have a successor. This problem is not limited to the Sōtō School. It has been frequently observed and remarked upon in various religious orders, and now there are even cases that end up in litigation. Circumstances like these are among the background factors that have led women to take part in movements that question the fairness of institutions and to voice their criticisms of them. When individual temple wives became aware that the doubts they had been feeling were not uniquely or idiosyncratically their own, but were actually shared with other women, they began to initiate protests in various different quarters with the aim of rectifying the situation, and this generated a new groundswell.

To the best of my knowledge, the earliest organization to be founded on the initiative of temple wives acting in collaboration was the Kyushu District Temple Wives Association (Kyūshū Kanku Jizokukai 九州管区寺族会). The Sōtō rules for temple wives state that they (the temple wives) should organize temple wives associations in order to realize closer collaboration with each other. These rules do not have any actual force, so it is not unusual in some regions to find that no associations have been established. There are even locations where temple wives in other Buddhist orders have yet to organize, and in the Sōtō School, there is at present no temple wives association formed as a nationwide organization. There are only the local administrative office temple wives associations set up at each of the Sōtō School administrative offices (*shūmusho* 宗務所) located in every prefecture of Japan, and in the smaller, parish units of organization, there are the parish temple wives associations. In 1993, however, women acting autonomously started the temple wives association that cut across the boundaries between Kyushu’s prefectures to form a single organization of their own at the district level. There were some male priests who cooperated with these women, and their presence provided part of the context for the establishment of their association. This temple wives association (a liaison body) in the Kyushu district celebrated the tenth anniversary of its founding in 2002 with the publication of a handbook for temple wives titled *The Way* (*Michi* みち). Stimulated by the example of such activity in the Kyushu district, temple wives in northern Japan then formed the Tohoku District Temple Wives Association in 2010, linking together six Tohoku prefectures with the sentiment that “the Tohoku region is one.” Immediately after this group was formed, it issued a newsletter stating explicitly that this district temple wives association had not been started under the central leadership of male priests, but rather was formed as the result of the plans and expressed desires of the temple wives associations acting autonomously in each of the prefectures. In 2001, temple wives who held positions in the temple wives associations and Sōtō School women’s associations in the Kanto region joined together with some others to start a Temple Wife Friendship Society (*Jizoku tomo-no-kai* 寺族友の会). Like the Kyushu District Temple Wives Association, the Temple

Wife Friendship Society was acting on a body of demands that included the creation of consultation help desks for the women of the religious order. Dissatisfaction with the various problems arising from the institution's ill-preparedness to address temple wife issues was of course a formative factor in the context of this development.

Temple Wives Begin to Speak Out

Given changes like these, it is no longer possible to ignore the voices of temple wives who are speaking out from their different places within the religious order. In consideration of these changed circumstances, a Temple Wife Consultation and Help Desk was established in 2004. What this actually amounted to was the designation of a telephone number in the Sōtō administrative headquarters that is answered by a rotating list of management and administrative staff members who serve as consultants and counselors. The staff members acting as consultants and counselors in this system were not necessarily knowledgeable about the institution or actual situations relating to temple wives.

The Sōtō order subsequently began holding public hearings conducted jointly by temple wives and the order's executive body in 2006. The first session was titled the "Meeting to Hear Views Regarding the Temple Wife Consultation and Help Desk and Related Matters," and it was held not as a specialized inquiry into the consultation and help desk specifically, but rather as an occasion for the order to elicit the views of temple wives on their various problems and their demands. Prior to this, the order used its public information organs to call on temple wives around Japan to write short essays stating their views and wishes. Word that public hearings were being held came as very good news to women at temples around the country who had been living with their awareness of the problems.

I visited the Sōtō administrative headquarters in December 2006 to take part in the public hearings. As I sat in the hearing venue filled to overflowing with temple wives who had come together from all parts of Japan, priests with an interest in the problem, and executives who had no choice but to be involved, I felt the passage of time and change with a particular keenness. When the temple wives who had gathered together from around the country proudly applauded the woman speakers up on the stage, their applause touched me, as well, where I sat with them.

The speakers came from different regions, were of different ages, and were from temples of different sizes, but they all spoke without hesitation as they presented their views. Describing this first public hearing, a friend remarked that she felt as though the huge mountain's worth of temple wife problems was finally seeing some movement, and this image of progress achieved certainly describes the sense of elation that we all felt at that hearing.

The speakers raised a variety of different matters that they treated as separate issues. These included doubts about the consultation and help desk arrangement and the quality of the assigned counselors, the necessity for establishing district temple wives' associations in every district, the improvement of training workshops and publications, and so on. They also declared that the Sôtō order should address the temple wives' demands in a serious manner. The main focus of the temple wives' concern, however, had to do with celibacy and the position of the temple wife. I listened and watched with my eyes wide open. The Kyushu district temple wives presented this poem: “To leave the temple behind / for reason of the head priest's death / is the temple wife's fate / and tomorrow it will be mine.” When another person declared that “the Sôtō School is a renunciate religious order, so it actually doesn't have any temple wives,” there came the ironic observation that the speaker has a spouse, and yet another person made the critical observation that temple wives, who are situated in the space between renunciate and lay Buddhism, “are ordered about in whatever way suits the convenience of male society.” In these earthshaking moments, the temple wives gathered there took up the many matters of doubt, of anger, and of pain that they had borne but had been finding difficult to formulate in words, and expressed them now to male priests of the Sôtō order's executive body. The summary statement from the session asserted that “the time has now come to think about the contradictions of our religious tenets in terms of present-day reality, and to correct them.” When it came time for questions, therefore, I responded with my own sense of how significant it was that the limitations of fictitious celibacy had been exposed from the temple wives' side. I was very happy to find that the temple wives there agreed with my assessment.

The next public hearings were held in 2007 under the revised title “Meeting to Hear Views on the ‘Temple Wife Problem.’” Notable on this occasion was a presentation given by a male priest who had worked as an educator for many years. He said that the temple wife issue was not something to be minimized by comparison with other issues, such as the problem of temple successors, but rather was a serious matter that called into question the views on human rights of every member of the Sôtō order who was involved. He further affirmed that the order was now being called on to achieve a way of life in which men and women are equal.

One statement that was made during the questions particularly impressed me. It came from a woman who had summoned up the resolve to attend the hearing from her home outside the major urban areas. She said that, as a mother, she was living with the anxiety that she would have to leave their temple if her husband, the head priest, were to die, and so she was in no position to provide her child the kind of excellent education that would assure him a place as successor. The audience broke out in applause, and I was deeply touched as well.

Starting the following year, however, the public hearings seemed to be losing their cohesiveness. One major factor in the lessening of interest was that although the temple wives were raising questions seriously as the parties who were immediately concerned, the responses from the Sôtô organization never reached the point of making definite statements and acknowledging accountability. In other words, even though the problem had been fully laid bare, there was virtually no specific response along the lines the women were looking for. An inevitable consequence was that as the sessions proceeded, the temple wives came to feel increasingly fretful and powerless. There was also another factor involved. Although some of the temple wives had made their statements on the understanding that they could remain anonymous, other wives who expressed themselves openly at the public hearings found themselves targets of unfortunate attention, including malicious gossip in their home communities.

At the third public hearings in 2008, the keynote speaker's theme was "Regarding Proposed Ritual Methods for Temple Wife (Subteacher) Funerals." This talk concerned the issue of creating a funerary ritual for temple wives, and it raised the question of whether those funerals should be carried out like the funerals of lay followers or patterned after the funerals of priests who have renounced secular life. According to the Sôtô order, this talk was based on work that was being done at the order's research center in response to long-standing requests as well as necessity. The question of just who had requested that research, however, remains unanswered.

This may be understandable as an interesting subject for research when approached purely in terms of doctrine. I do not think, however, that any of the women concerned ever expressed any desire at a public hearing or temple wife study group to receive an official determination of how their own funerals should be handled. I have heard that this attempt to establish such a funerary ritual took place as part of a good faith effort to enact some specific measure that would help clarify the temple wife's position. There is no denying, however, that this aspect of funerary ritual was a topic very much removed from these women's everyday concerns.

Some temple wives who are friends of mine told me that they left the hearing with a feeling of dissatisfaction. As they understood what had been said, a special ritual for temple wives was to be devised. This seemed to mean that temple wives were not seen either as lay followers or as renunciates, and therefore just further emphasized their feeling that they were being relegated to a category that was both doctrinally and institutionally ambiguous (AWAYA 2011).

When the fourth public hearings were held in 2009, they were no longer characterized by the elation expressed so vividly by the temple wives themselves at the first and second hearings. The results were also disappointing to me and my friends. This time the keynote talk was given by the head of the Education

Division on the subject of “Temple Wives are Bodhisattvas.” The point of the talk was that if temple wives act as bodhisattvas who listen to parishioners’ worries, then they certainly would not need fear being driven out of their temples. It is possible that this priest’s observations were founded in good faith, but many of the temple wives came away from his talk with a greater sense of powerlessness than before. They despaired, realizing that the only people they had to rely on were themselves, and they wondered how many more times they would have to present their problems to the order before they could be acknowledged and understood.

The fifth public hearings took place the following year under the changed title, “Meeting to Hear Views Regarding Issues Involving Temple Wives.” This turned out to be effectively the final public hearing, and not surprisingly, the meeting hall was even quieter than it had been the year before. During the questions, people spoke about the predicaments that temple wives face because of the complicated human relationships in temples, and they brought up specific cases of wives who had been forcibly removed from their temples. Then a friend of mine spoke out, her voice choking as she asked why it was that the public hearings were only bringing a repetition of the same responses from the order but not making any progress toward solutions. All that needs to be done to resolve the situation, she said, is to review the order’s constitutional prescriptions. It is because the order will not do this that it is embroiled in a problem that is unforgivable for religionists. If the order truly cares about the Sōtō School, then it should take this problem seriously and do something about it. I was sitting next to her when she said this, and I could feel my own chest tighten with the tension of the moment. I feel certain that every temple wife there agreed with her.

But the next year, the order decided to suspend the public hearings. That was in 2011, and as matters stand now, no comprehensive report has been issued on the five public hearings that were held, whether regarding the problems that were presented at them, the discussions about those problems, or how the order would deal with the problems going forward. Women had come together from all over Japan to take part in the hearings, treating them as a kind of circuit that would convey the outcry of their hearts and minds to the male priests of the order. It should be immediately apparent that the order’s final disposition of the hearings was a betrayal of the women’s hopes.

As I see it, however, the public hearings held over those five years amounted to more than just a kind of valve that allowed the temple wives to let off steam. The hearings were more meaningful than that, and my sense of it was that the hearings were successful as “collaborative politics on a single issue.” According to Ueno Chizuko, this is a modality of collaboration that enables people to work together so long as they can agree on a single point, even if they do not share the same trend analyzes or strategies otherwise (UENO 2011, 274–75). After all, the

hearings showed that it was possible for the temple wives to transcend their various differences in region, temple size, age, involvement in gender issues, and so on, and, without limiting themselves to the specific circumstances of their own particular temple lives, they were able to act with solidarity on the single issue of clarifying the position of women who are temple wives so they could convey their protest to the male priests who persist in the fiction of a celibate religious order.

Reactions from the Sōtō Order

As for subsequent initiatives by the Sōtō School, it was apparent that they were based on a mistaken assumption that the temple wife problem had been solved. There were even signs of a backlash against the temple wives. At a Sōtō council convened in June 2011, for example, a proposal was made to revise the Sōtō School rules on temple wife duties as written in Article 2 of chapter 1. Like the majority of Buddhist orders in Japan, the Sōtō School defined the duties of the temple wife to include the role of assistant (*hosa* 補佐) to the head priest in matters of temple administration. The provisions stated that “the temple wife must assist the head priest in endeavoring to make the temple flourish, to bring up the head priest’s successor, and to educate the lay followers.” The proposal appeared to make light of the temple wife’s contribution to the temple by rewriting the words “assist the head priest” to read instead “with the head priest.”

The Sōtō order council that was convened in February of the following year adopted this proposed change to the temple wife rules by unanimous agreement. However, other language not in the original proposal was also added so that the first part of this provision ended up being phrased as, “the temple wife must follow the religious tenets of this school and cooperate with the head priest, together with whom she...”¹ A media report explained that the injunction to “cooperate” was inserted before the reference to acting “together” with the head priest because there were council members on the committee who were concerned that deleting the reference to assisting “might give the impression that the temple wife is an equal of the head priest, who is the representative executive” of the temple. The addition was therefore made to “maintain a balance” (*Chūgai Nippō*, 28 February 2012). This appears to mean, in other words, that the head priest and temple wife are like the two indispensable halves of a single whole in temple administration, but only when one assumes that the head priest takes precedence.

Soon after this revision was announced, the journal *Jimonkōryū* put out a special issue on “why temple wife duties were changed so that ‘assistant to the

1. The original text reads: 原案にはなかった文言も付加され、条文の前半部は「寺族は本宗の宗旨を信奉し、住職に協力し、ともに～」と最終的に決められた。

head priest’ became ‘acting with the head priest.’” In that issue of the journal, some temple wives who are friends of mine expressed their candid views to the Sōtō order, saying that since the order remained incapable of giving official recognition to temple wives, just making this small revision in its language would not bring the order in step with reality. The issue also reported the harsh comment by a male priest that this revision could be seen as symptomatic, rather, of the order’s relentless persistence in not recognizing that temple wives have an authority that is on a par with priests (*Jimonkōryū* 寺門興隆, April 2012, 14–19).

A comparison with the Jōdo Shin School on this matter may be useful. The current and previous versions of the Ōtani faction temple regulations define the duty of the priest’s wife (*bōmori* 坊守) not to act as “assistant to the head priest” but to act “together with the head priest” in making the temple flourish and grow. In principle, the Ōtani faction is made up of both men and women, but even here we find obvious gender inequalities. Friends of mine who are temple wives in the Jōdo Shin School frequently remark that they are “burdened with myriad responsibilities while at the same time they are not given the right to speak.” In other words, the rules for temple wives’ duties state that wives are to act “with” the head priest in developing and supporting the temple, but in most cases, the women are not allowed any substantive role in religious instruction.

Comparison with the Shin School

There is one point that I want to make very clear. I am not arguing that temple wives should take action primarily in order to acquire the legitimate status of a spouse. The *bōmori* movement in the Jōdo Shin School shows that there is nothing to be gained by clinging to the spousal status that has been recognized by the priests. A lay Buddhist order has no need to conceal the reality of priests’ wives behind the principle of worldly renunciation, so one might expect the women in such an order to be relatively free from discrimination and repression in the first place. Despite this doctrinal and institutional difference, however, the fact is that those women are also placed in positions subordinate to male priests. The view of women presented by the male priests of the Shin School differs little from what is found in a renunciate religious order (KAWAHASHI and KUROKI 2004, 92).

It is also true that the women of the Shin order demonstrate an awareness of the problem of gender inequality and an enthusiasm in seeking institutional reform that is conspicuous by comparison with what women in other Buddhist orders are doing. 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) is the forerunner of movements to censure gender discrimination in traditional Buddhist orders. This association was founded on the initiative of women as an active body that would address the stance taken by

the men of the order's executive body in their statements denigrating women and in their rigid refusal to grant women religious qualifications equal to men.

When this association was inaugurated in 1986, the Ōtani faction did not recognize women as head priests. This faction constituted a rather anomalous case in the context of the Jōdo School, the Sōtō School, and the many others that traditionally allowed women to become head priests. One parallel example is the Roman Catholic Church, which does not recognize women as officiants. There, the argument that women were not made in the image of God, or that Jesus did not include any women among the apostles, was used as grounds for the traditional exclusion of women (WIJNGAARDS 2005). In the case of the Ōtani faction, however, there is no clear doctrinal foundation to explain why women cannot become head priests. The kind of blatantly discriminatory statements made by the executive body of this order angered the women and caused them to band together at the end of that year.

That time in 1986 corresponds to the period when controversy over ordaining women as Christian priests was growing heated in the Anglican Church in Japan, which had not previously recognized women as priests. When only men can become officiants or head priests, as in the case of the Japanese Anglican Church and the Ōtani faction, the objective for a women's movement can be defined relatively clearly. It is to make it possible for women to become officiants and head priests. The situation is different in the movement for gender equality for temple wives, where the point is that these women had been made into a virtually invisible presence within a renunciate religious order that already recognized women head priests.

A Religious Order Goes Astray

The problem discussed up to this point also involves the disjuncture between the identity of women in the temple and the acknowledgement they are given. The movement for self-definition performs a crucial function for women in the temple because it engages them in finding ways to confirm the significance of their own being and to declare their own autonomous choices.

Incredible as it may seem, even today the Sōtō School holds matchmaking parties called "smile sessions" under the auspices of the temple successor help desk. These occasions are organized by the order's Welfare Department as a way for priests who are looking for spouses to meet with women who want to become spouses of priests. It is obvious that the order has engaged in this activity out of its apprehension over the lack of temple successors, a deficiency that is caused by the increasing difficulty for priests to find spouses. In other words, the order sets aside the problem of marriage by supposedly renunciate priests while at the same time it publicly supports activities to promote marriage for priests. This

phenomenon may appear peculiar, but similar things are also occurring in other Buddhist orders in Japan. I will note in passing that the consultation and help desk for temple wives is apparently now located on the Sôtô order’s administrative headquarters network as a web link under the name “Temple Wife Window.” It is difficult to determine the nature of the linked site, however, and whether it is the kind of help desk, as discussed earlier, that is intended to deal with the problems of temple wives.

*From Ordination of Temple Wives to
Presentation of Dharma Names to Temple Wives*

In April 2015, the Sôtô School enacted an astonishing revision to its constitution as an institutional corrective for the ambiguousness of the constitution’s definition of temple wife. For the most part, however, the revision did not reflect what temple wives themselves had to say about the matter. It was clear that the decision had been made on the initiative of the executive body and through closed discussion. In short, the executive body accepted the report of the Commission on the Temple Wife Problem and changed the definition of temple wife to read, “A person recorded in the temple wife register is termed a *jizoku*.”

This eliminated the program of temple wife ordination, which, as discussed earlier, was confusingly similar to priestly ordination, and it established a new program for a “temple wife dharma name presentation ceremony” (*jizoku anmyô shinjushiki* 寺族安名親授式). A document distributed by the Sôtô administrative headquarters stated that henceforth the terms “ordination of temple wives” and “temple wife ordination ceremony” would no longer be used. The terms to be used instead were “presentation of a temple wife dharma name” and “temple wife dharma name presentation ceremony.” The document further stated that a person who had completed this temple wife dharma name presentation ceremony would be recorded in the temple wife register and a certificate of registration would be issued by the Sôtô administrative headquarters.

Another important point here is that the document stated clearly that “a temple wife is not a renunciate member—neither an ordained priest (*biku* 比丘) nor nun (*bikuni* 比丘尼)—of the fourfold sangha (*shishu* 四衆), but is a lay follower—a male lay follower (*ubasoku* 優婆塞) or female lay follower (*ubai* 優婆夷).” It also stated that “the ordination of a temple wife does not indicate renunciation of secular life, and in this it differs from the ordination of a priest.” The priests, who as husbands are in marital relationships, are nevertheless assumed to be renunciates, and this assumption remains unexamined. This change in the definition of temple wife is therefore based on a double standard.

A woman employee at the Sôtô administrative headquarters who has been involved with the temple wife problem for many years said:

I've been hearing temple wives say things like, "I think it's getting to be time for male priests to acknowledge that they are priests who are householders [that is, not renunciates]. Isn't it about time that they should go through their discipline, have families, and develop a new form of faith that includes their families? If they had done that, I could have had more faith in Buddhism to start, before I came to the temple as a bride." I don't like it that temple wives are still put in a position that makes them come out with these sad comments.

(SENO 2015, 197)

According to one temple wife in the Tohoku region, she actually heard insensitive male priests make remarks to the effect that this situation is very convenient for them, because if they do not have their wives go through the dharma name ceremony, then their wives do not count as temple wives, so the priests do not have to let them go out to attend training workshops or other such activities. This kind of comment makes one wonder what sense of human rights those priests may have.

In the major study by Richard Jaffe cited earlier, he concluded that while the practice of ascetic monasticism is treated as an ideal that is at the core of the identity of the religious order, "many Japanese Buddhist clerics and their families continue to live amidst the tensions arising from the contradiction between the idealization of monastic, celibate practice that remains at the heart of their sectarian identity and the practical reality of family life at their temples, which have become almost home" (JAFJE 2001, 241). Sad to say, I think that what he wrote in 2001 now looks like an overly idealistic interpretation of the reality. In light of my argument so far, discussion of the temple wife problem will probably come down to a realization that the tensions Jaffe found have already become moot.

Ian Reader has made the strict observation that when priests marry and have families, then those priests have already become psychologically indistinguishable from lay people. They enjoy consumer culture just as ordinary people do and so they will come to be classed with those people (READER 2011, 246). It is in fact the case, in present-day Japan, that priests are extremely market driven, and they receive a high degree of exposure in the media, including the entertainment media, to the extent that this has become a social phenomenon. Many of these priests are performing in an educational role, providing the general public with easy explanations of Buddhism as representatives of the traditions of Japanese culture. They remain uninterested in the blatantly discriminatory treatment of women priests in the Buddhist orders, though they appear to consider themselves public intellectuals.

There is another case to consider here, though it is not from the Sôtô School. A discussion recently took place in the council of the Jôdo School that characterized the wives and families of priests as liabilities to the order from the perspective of the public good (*kôekisei* 公益性). The rules of the order were revised accordingly.

The reasoning was that the temple is a public place, and providing care to priests' wives or other family members is therefore contributory to the misappropriation of temple resources as private possessions. This violates the nature of religion as a public good (*Chūgai Nippō*, 28 August 2015).

It does not make sense, however, that the women living in temples should have to forfeit their human rights in order to inflate the temple's aspect as a public good. Most of the priests who appear in the media, as previously mentioned, act as though they are spiritual guides bestowing Buddhist teachings on the masses, but for them to take this role while remaining blind to the gender problems that exist around them is laughable. It is deceptive to argue for the public character of religion while failing to consider the perspective of gender equality (KAWAHASHI 2016).

Isomae points out a danger posed by this argument for public religion that has grown popular in Japan. That is, it will result in large numbers of people being deprived of their social rights. He observes perceptively that the irresponsible attribution of public character eventually makes us insensitive to the suffering of others so that we become unaware of the violence of exclusion that is being committed in the name of public religion (ISOMAE 2012, 227). This argument is predicated on a binary opposition between the security of the women in temples on the one hand, and the public character of temples on the other. To do this, as the measure by the Jōdo School does, is to become devoid of consideration for vulnerable members of the religious community.

Toward New Horizons

The Japan Buddhist Federation (全日本仏教会), which is the only organization that brings together all the traditional Buddhist orders under a single roof, started appointing women to its various committees about a decade ago. This probably came about because the Buddhist community in Japan grew aware of the remarkable activities for gender equality by large numbers of Buddhist women in other countries, and they realized that gender equality was a problem that they could no longer avoid in Japan (KAWAHASHI 2012b, 133–34). Now that the secretary-general and other members of the federation's executive body have changed, however, a backlash has occurred and the number of women committee members has been greatly reduced. In other words, the tendency toward a backlash against gender equality has unfortunately extended throughout the entire Buddhist community.

Women who commit to the gender equality movement in the Buddhist community do so from a variety of standpoints. There are obviously differences between an unmarried woman priest and a woman who is the spouse of a male priest, and there are generational differences and regional differences as well as differences in temple size. The resulting disparities between the women cannot

be overlooked. The fact that solidarity is possible even in diversity, however, gives reason for hope. Iijima Keido, a nun of the Sōtō School, wrote that women came together “precisely because they felt the pain of gender inequality, so they sought to transcend that pain and encounter the Buddha” (IIJIMA 2011, 26). The women in the Buddhist community whose image we see here are standing in the same position as the women in Christianity who direct their critical gaze upon their church while at the same time not abandoning it. This stance has been described as “defecting in place” (WINTER et al. 2009).

Creating an account of the temple wife problem necessarily involves examining the way of life of male priests, as well. The question being posed now is how the Buddhist order can undergo an egalitarian transformation through the participation of women. After all, it is not only women who feel today that the religious order is closed and makes them feel powerless. If we can turn a critical eye on the various hierarchies of power that religious orders have built within themselves, and the structures of disparity that oppress the disadvantaged, and bring the will to transform them out into the light of clarity, then new possibilities are bound to emerge even for present-day Japanese Buddhism. For that purpose, it is crucial that gender equality movements in the Buddhist orders do as ordinary movements in secular society have done, and seek the involvement of women and men who hold themselves apart from gender problems, and, without slipping into exclusivity but persevering tenaciously, engage in dialogue to reach a shared awareness of the problem.

[Translated by Richard Peterson]

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