



Paola Cavaliere, *Promising Practices: Women Volunteers in Contemporary Japanese Religious Civil Society*

Leiden: Brill, 2015. xii + 288 pages. Paperback, \$124.00. ISBN 978-9-0042-82162.

THE STUDY of the social contribution of religious organizations is nothing new, considering the amount of literature, for example, about the war effort made by religious institutions in modern Japan. More recently, scholars, especially of the sociology of religion, have taken special interest in the undertaking of the emotional care of disaster victims or of organizing volunteer groups by religious individuals and organizations, in particular after the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011. Unlike historical studies of religious institutions' cooperation with the government for the war effort, whose discussion is sometimes framed by the issue of religion and the state, the newer currents of scholarship have focused on religion and religious organizations as social capital, and their potential to make various positive contributions to civil society. The question then becomes how religions organize their social activities and make themselves visible within civil society alongside nonreligious agencies (MUKHOPADHYAYA 2005, 21). Paola Cavaliere's book attempts to answer this question by examining the activities of faith-based volunteer groups, focusing on the issue of gender and identity formation of the participants. This is an innovative and significant contribution to

the extant literature in the area of Japanese religions and their social contribution. Cavaliere explains the scope of her research, asserting the importance of women's agencies in volunteering, which has not been investigated in previous studies, to illustrate "the internal dynamics of faith-based volunteer groups, the strategies that women employ to reach their aims, their position vis-à-vis society and religious institutions, and what social identity they develop from that" (17).

This ethnographical study is about women's identity formation and social change, focusing on volunteer groups sponsored by the religious organizations Shinnyoen, Risshō Kōseikai, and St Ignatius Catholic Church. In chapter 1, Cavaliere reexamines "an overview of the cultural ideals and mainstream narratives women can draw upon in their exploratory trajectory of identity formation" (20). In this chapter, she questions the claims that religion is oppressive to women and that volunteer work reproduces traditional gender ideologies. Chapter 2 presents profiles of three religious denominations that sponsor volunteer groups, based on literature, interviews with staff members, and participant observation. Also in this chapter she introduces five targeted volunteer groups: Risshō Kōseikai Itabashi Church Social Welfare Association, Risshō Kōseikai Kawagoe Church Volunteers (parenting class), Shinnyoen Social Contribution Department—Youth Division, Univers Volunteers Tokyo (Shinnyoen-sponsored NPO), and St. Ignatius Church Yotsuya Onigiri Nakama (welfare support for homeless people). Chapter 3 is a profile of 82 survey respondents. In chapter 4, seven women among the 46 interviewees are highlighted and their narratives are related. Chapters 5 and 6 analyze women's religiosity and the effects of volunteering on their lives, respectively.

As Cavaliere describes in chapter 1, the existing discourse on women and religion often argues that religion preserves a conservative value system, which often limits the activities and the choices of women. Also, women's volunteering could be seen as "free labor" by household wives who are taken advantage of, while the government should be responsible for the issues. Cavaliere's study presents counterarguments against these two long-standing criticisms of religion and volunteering in relation to women, by illustrating that women who are religious and involved in volunteer activities are not simply being told how to be and what to do by the religious teachings; rather, they use religion for the purpose of self-cultivation and are empowered as civic agents through the volunteer activities supported by religious organizations. Cavaliere pays scholarly attention to the place where religion and civic life intersect and where "housewives," who tend to be considered to lack political agency in civic society, find ways to be involved with society with their own vision and purpose. They are empowered and transformed by finding their own voices and goals. This threshold of religion and society is the discovery of the author, who illustrates that the fruitful exchange of knowledge and the resulting interactions become sources of

women's empowerment. Based on the study, Cavaliere makes some concluding statements.

However, they tended to loosen their religiosity in their everyday practices (*sic*) favouring a process of self and social reflexivity that fostered further civic engagement. Religiosity was never claimed as the main source of these respondent's volunteer endeavours and was never articulated when dealing with the institutions enabling the voluntary provision of services. (223)

By exercising their role as citizens in faith-based volunteer groups, women become the gateway for the religious organization to participate in the social contract. At the same time, women learn how to negotiate among power structures and institutions. (230)

These statements summarize the points that the author has been arguing throughout the book. In the rest of this review, I would like to raise two questions relating to these points, to further consider the implications of the book. The questions are: 1) is religion really irrelevant to the women's motivation, performance, and satisfaction in volunteer activities sponsored by religious organizations?; and 2) does the "empowerment" of women, described in this study, contribute to gender equality in Japanese religious institutions or society in general?

Cavaliere has argued that in the case of volunteer activities, religion is one of the tools for women's empowerment to become active as civic agencies. Based on the survey she conducted, for example, it is said that religious involvement is not the prime factor in generating civic engagement. In other words, the volunteers, who often have had volunteer experience prior to joining the current volunteer groups, have a propensity to join in the activities regardless of their religious background. Also, from the interview with a Risshō Kōseikai member, Cavaliere makes the observation, "T-san never mentioned doctrinal validations for her social actions.... Despite relating her volunteer motivation to religious experience, she was actually articulating her social engagement in terms of awareness and advocacy to redress ongoing social issues within the socio-political environment in which she was situated" (130). A seemingly different observation was made by Mukhopadhyaya in her study on social contributions by Risshō Kōseikai and Hōonji. Mukhopadhyaya stated that the motivation of those who are involved with social welfare activities is explained in religious terms such as "sent from Buddha" (仏の使者) or "practice of the way of Bodhisattva" (菩薩行), and that they acknowledge the needs and feel responsible based on their faith (MUKHOPADHYAYA 2005, 294). Both Cavaliere and Mukhopadhyaya recognize that religious organizations neither use the activities as an opportunity to propagate their religions nor use religious ideas and language while engaged in the activities (MUKHOPADHYAYA 2005, 288; 187–92 in the book under review). Yet

while Mukhopadhyaya concludes that religious organizations are influenced by discourse and principles of the public sphere through their social participation, with which they also bring religious discourse into society, Cavaliere concludes that “the way interviewees talked of their religious identity suggests that they were more concerned with the practical goals of their projects: they sustained their participant role in the wider community through and beyond their religious organization, and not simply because of it” (190).

The difference in their conclusions could be because they focused on religious people at different levels in the denominational hierarchy. Yet there is also another and more probable explanation. It is Bryan Wilson’s well-known secularization theory, which states that where religion and its discourse used to be dominant in the community, the rational and positivistic world view took its place in modern society based on the social contract. The secularization model has been criticized and modified, yet it is helpful to understand the Japanese context in this case where the rational and positivistic world view is the greatest common measure. In such a society, religious people speak different languages when they communicate within the community where they share a religious world view and with religious language of their own, while they are also very much familiar with the language of the rationalistic and positivistic modern society. This leads one to wonder whether Cavaliere communicated with the respondents of the survey and interviewees only in the “secular language” such informants speak. To consider this point further, the access to the content of the questionnaire would be helpful, but it is not available for the reader. To hear religious speech may require a researcher to inquire into a more personal or even private level of the informants’ lives, beyond simple questions about opinions on the government or gender role. Especially since, as Cavaliere is aware, “For members of Shinnyoen SCD-Youth Division, becoming a volunteer was itself an improvement in their spiritual career” (197); listening carefully to their voices may have revealed some significant difference from the nonreligious volunteer members of Yotsuya Onigiri Nakama.

Another issue is the relationship of the empowerment of women and gender equality. To analyze the different degrees in the process of empowerment, Cavaliere uses the “conceptual framework based upon the literature of empowerment in social work” (32) developed by GUTIERREZ and her colleagues (1998). The indicator is explained in Cavaliere as follows: “[The] empowerment process occurs on three levels: personal, interpersonal and environmental (GUTIERREZ et al. 1998, 8). It also involves four components (1998, 4–5): a critical review of attitudes and beliefs about oneself and one’s socio-political environment; the validation of one’s experience through collective experience; an increased knowledge and set of skills for critical thinking and action; and the action(s) taken for personal and political change” (32).

Based on Gutierrez's criteria, Cavaliere then examines the six groups, and concludes that the Yotsuya Onigiri Nakama is the best at empowering its members, while Shinnyoen SCD is the least. Cavaliere explains the reasons for the ranking, but Gutierrez's three levels and four components of empowerment are spared from critical evaluation. It is not that they are bad scales, but the liberal democratic values prevalent in this type of index should in no way be taken as universal. It is not to say, however, these women were never empowered. From the examples shown in this study, it is obvious that the informants had positive experiences, and some of them developed their skills and connections to undertake greater opportunities, so it is undeniable that those people are "empowered." Yet the women themselves do not realize that they are empowered in the sense Gutierrez argues. Also, most of the informants are married heterosexual women or young adults who can depend on their parents (that is, do not need to worry about earning their living), living in urban areas. In other words, their social class and economic situations are similar, even though they were working in seven different volunteer groups and three different denominations. The volunteer activities could offer a gateway for them to become "aware of the socio-political structures and develop a political consciousness" (31), yet this gateway is possible only on the foundation of the modern family structure. Thus to say that "the results show that almost half of the respondents were concerned with the effect of their social work on gender ideology and women's roles, both in their private life and in society at large, thus linking their volunteering to the potentiality for social change" (113) is perhaps a hasty judgment. Because "this work asked what women *do with* religion, instead of what religion makes women do or be" (193), the women's opinions about their religious organizations are never scrutinized. T-san, for example, is critical toward the government and policies, but we are never told her thoughts on the structure of Risshō Kōseikai. While being mediators for the religious organization to make their presence felt in a society, the women work for free while men are paid by the denomination. Their empowerment does not affect the gender gap or hierarchy within the religious organization.

The way these women become active civic agencies through volunteer work and become more aware of their political identities, as described in this book, is remarkable. Yet for a woman, politics begins long before she becomes a wife, a mother, or a volunteer worker. It begins before she chose her role, or learned to tell her story. The politics is the power structured in her life, constantly telling her to be a certain way, play certain roles, and be content with the choices she has been given to be a happy person in society, without her ever realizing it.

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