



Niwa Nobuko 丹羽宣子, “Sōryorashisa” to “joseirashisa” no *shūkyō shakaigaku: Nichirenshū josei sōryo no jirei kara* 「僧侶らしさと「女性らしさ」の宗教社会学—日蓮宗女性僧侶の事例から

Kyoto: Kōyō Shobō, 2019. 222 pages. Hardcover, ¥4,200. ISBN-10: 978-4-7710-3114-2.

MY EVALUATION of Niwa Nobuko’s book “Sōryorashisa” to “joseirashisa” no *shūkyō shakaigaku* questions whether the surge in acclaim for scholarship uncritical of the oppression against women in Japan is justified.<sup>1</sup> Niwa’s monograph tells the life stories of female Nichiren Buddhist priests in Japan. The book’s purpose is “to record and explicate ‘what it is for a woman to live as a priest’ in present-day Japanese society.” Against the backdrop of “the realities involved when women with diverse backgrounds and a variety of attributes are active as priests in society,” the book also aims to “give an account of those women priests together with their contemporaneous social context” (i–ii). To do this, the author drew on her interviews with female Buddhist priests, experiential sources, and sectarian survey data.<sup>2</sup> The book under review is based on a revised and expanded doctoral thesis submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences at Hitotsubashi University in the 2016 academic year.

Unlike the “traditional nun” who is unmarried, tonsured, and lives in a convent, the eleven female Buddhist priests interviewed by Niwa for this study are women of diverse backgrounds. Some of Niwa’s informants were unmarried women, others

1. This review is based on a Japanese version by the author, published in *Jendā kenkyū* 23 (2020): 250–252.

2. The interviews were used in combination with data from the “Report on the Survey of All Nichiren School Women Teachers” (*Nichirenshū zen josei kyōshi ankēto hōkokusho* 日蓮宗全女性教師アンケート報告書), published in 2004 by the sect’s research institute for contemporary religions (Nichirenshū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūjo 日蓮宗現代宗教研究所).

were married; some grew their hair, while others used wigs to hide their tonsures when facing the “situations and people that they were encountering” (61).

The author analyzes her interviews and survey data from two different angles: “1) a focus on ‘experiences of problems,’ and 2) a description of women priests that cuts across their religious situations and their situations as people living ordinary lives” (14). For the interviews, a life story approach was adopted that “attends to the continuity of events on the time axis we call life, laying bare the changing meanings of experience brought about by transition through life stages” (13).

“Priestliness” (*sōryorashisa*) and “womanliness” (*jozeirashisa*), as referred to in the book’s title, concern the everyday lives of women priests and the ways that female Buddhist professionals engage in religious and other activities within and beyond their affiliated religious communities. The book’s concept suggests “internalizations of roles society wants them to play, and codes for self-expression.” Priestliness and womanliness are described as “occasions for collision with society at large and with other people, sparks that ignite conflict, that arise when the women act to maintain their sense of self.” Therefore, we are told, “there is a need for a point of view that can describe the society external to the religious community in conjunction with” the society internal to the women priests’ religious community (16).

A central focus of this book are the life stories of three younger female priests explored in chapters 3 to 5. Their narratives and life circumstances are all profoundly interesting. The accounts describe how the passage of years caused shifts and changes in these women’s thinking, allowing the reader to gain a deeper understanding of “the life story, the tale of the life” of each woman (61). The book also shows how these women priests felt about the act of taking the tonsure, as well as their subsequent use of a wig. On these points, the author achieves her stated purpose of describing the reality of everyday life for women priests who are unlike the “traditional nun” (11).

However, the author’s use of expressions like “the ‘priestliness’ of being tonsured and using no makeup” (7) or “the tonsured appearance that departs so much from the norm of ‘womanliness’” (16) is problematic. Niwa describes “priestliness” as a norm presumably shared by the society internal to the religious community, whereas “womanliness” is implicitly or explicitly understood as a quality presumably sought by society external to the religious community. The problem is that Niwa’s argument essentializes these qualities, which I found discomfiting. It also takes the distinction between external “womanliness” and internal “priestliness” for granted.

What calls for our attention are not only the women or their actions but the structures marginalizing women in Japan today, which are not made explicit by Niwa. Within these structures, women will not be accepted by others around

them unless they act in ways that conform to such terms of likeness. In chapter 5, for example, the woman identified as “C” says that “the world of priests (*obōsan* お坊さん) is a society of men,” and more: “You must not make any careless mistakes,” “Always keep a smile on your face, even when you’re not finding anything enjoyable,” “Make it a regular practice to wear the monastic work outfit with tonsure and no makeup, ‘so as not to get demerits,’” “Make yourself up to look sweet and gentle, keep a smile on your face, and force yourself to play the fool at meal-times” (116–121). I found her words difficult to swallow.

Niwa describes these and other expressions by “C” as “skillful tactics” (*takumi na shudan* 巧みな手段) (118). She then asks: “Should that behavior be criticized because it preserves existing gender discrimination?” (138). However, I wonder whether it is acceptable to readily identify such behavior as “skillful tactics” to begin with. Similar cause for concern is found elsewhere in the book. The woman identified as “B” in chapter 4 is shown making effective use of her experience as a mother to carry out missionary programs that are tailored to mothers and children in her community. Niwa describes this as “the use of ‘womanliness’” and as a “strategy” by “B” (193). However, “B” herself states in the conclusion: “Ms. Niwa describes my activities as strategic, but I am not doing those things as a strategy. I do them because those are the only things that I can do” (202). In other words, “B” has no choice, whereas Niwa’s representation suggests that “B” can actively negotiate the boundaries within this “society of men,” as “C” describes it.

Before quoting the above words from “B,” the author reflects on her own behavior, admitting that she “ended up going too far at times in eliciting the women priests’ voices” (201). Here I wonder whether Niwa meant she went too far in eliciting what the female priests already had in their hearts from the start, or if she deliberately took their words out of context to make them fit her own argument. Viewing the book in this light introduces some doubt regarding its premise that women priests employ “priestliness” and “womanliness” as “circuits for manifesting their religious agency” (17).

This is not the only study to assert that women manifest their religious agency by making use of “womanliness,” or that they gain a sense of self-fulfillment by taking on roles associated uniquely with women. Such findings are not uncommon in recent European and American scholarship on Japanese religions. When such research receives acclaim, there is a danger that real gender inequalities will be rendered invisible as a result (KAWAHASHI 2019, 45). Religious authorities and male scholars of religion tend to welcome this kind of uncritical research that refrains from advocating the correction of inequality. The International Institute for the Study of Religions awarded Niwa’s book a prize in February 2020, and

all but a few of the officers there are male scholars and religionists.<sup>3</sup> An article announcing the prize reported that the book was recognized for “taking the conventional feminist perspective into account” while yet showing an abundance of willingness to “go beyond that to open up new areas of research on women clerics” (*Chūgai nippō* 中外日報, 6 March 2020). However, feminist research exists as such precisely because it takes a critical stance toward androcentrism and the marginalization of women. It is therefore difficult to accept that Niwa’s book opened up new horizons, as her research is also based on the cumulative accomplishments of feminist research. I hope that the acclaim given to studies following this trend will not cause the achievements of past feminist studies to fall into neglect.

According to a report on the most recent regular convocation by the Nichiren sect, female members called for the institution to be made more open for active participation by women. It was also stressed that to increase the number of female teachers, it would be desirable to admit untensured women to the training schools (*shingyō dōjō* 信行道場) where teacher qualifications are obtained (*Chūgai nippō*, 27 March 2020). It is my hope that the author will take into account these kinds of trends in the religious community as a whole and pursue research that links the individual experiences and narratives of women to more comprehensive perspectives beyond the life stories of individuals.

[Translated by Richard Peterson]

#### REFERENCE

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- 2019 Jendāronteki tenkai ga akiraka ni suru Nihon shūkyōgaku no shomondai: Urusura Kingu to Mōni Joi o chūshin ni ジェンダー論的転回が明らかにする日本宗教学の諸問題—ウルスラ・キングとモーニィ・ジョイを中心に. *Shūkyō kenkyū* 93/2: 31–55.

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3. In the *Shūkan Bukkyō taimusu* 週刊仏教タイムス (12 December 2019), Tsukada Hotaka 塚田穂高 recommended this book as one of the “three books of the year” commenting favorably on its “freshness.” By contrast, in his review of the book, Kawamata Toshinori 川又俊則 referred unfavorably to the impact the book had on *Gekkan jūshoku* 月刊住職 and other such trade publications (*Shakaigaku hyōron* 社会学評論 70/4, 2020).