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A Feminist Religion Scholar's Tribute to the *JJRS* and NIRC

THE *JJRS* has made major contributions toward the mainstreaming of gender studies in the study of religion in Japan. As a feminist scholar of religion and the current Executive Director of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, I have had the pleasure of observing and participating in this endeavor. Still, there have been many difficulties and hardships along the way, and there is much more work to be done. Here I would like to briefly reflect on my fruitful collaboration with NIRC and the *JJRS* and my experiences in the Japanese academy and to raise issues that our field must address in the future.

After earning my PhD in Religious Studies from Princeton University, I was affiliated with NIRC for four years as a research associate from 1992, after which I took up a full-time post at the Nagoya Institute of Technology. What surprised me most when I returned to Japan was the strong tendency in the Japanese academy of religious studies not to recognize gender and feminist studies as a legitimate academic discipline, and unlike in the West, where the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* already existed, there were few good publications on gender and religion. In this context, it was significant for my academic career that the *JJRS* published my article on gender issues in Sōtō Zen Buddhism in 1995 (KAWAHASHI 1995). I was also pleased that two of my esteemed friends, Jackie Stone and Ian Reader, wrote for this issue.

One of my most vivid memories of my time at NIRC is of the symposium on dialogue between Soka Gakkai and the Catholic Church in September 1995,

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where I was audacious enough to respond to a presentation by the current President of Nanzan University, Robert Kisala.¹ Later, in June 2013, I was a commentator at the Nanzan Seminar for junior non-native Japanese-language scholars of Japanese religion, and I have fond memories of Jolyon Thomas, my *kōhai* 後輩 at Princeton, being among the graduate student presenters at the seminar.² The NIRC has been crucial in providing a space for nurturing candid discussion and collaboration and the *JJRS* has always been a venue for forward-thinking, and at times controversial, scholarship.

Thanks to Yauchi Yoshiaki 矢内義顯, the *Journal of Religious Studies* (*Shūkyō kenkyū*) of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies published a special issue on “Gender and Sexuality” in 2019, which was said to be a groundbreaking publication. However, I would note that the *JJRS* led the charge in these efforts more than a decade earlier. I had the opportunity to edit two special issues on gender and religion for *JJRS* in 2003 and 2017, respectively. Paul Swanson helped make this possible, as he also questioned the androcentricity of Japanese religious studies. The first special feature was “Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan,” which I coedited with Kuroki Masako 黒木雅子 in 2003. Then Kobayashi Naoko 小林奈央子 and I edited “Gendering Religious Practices in Japan” in 2017. This special issue led to the first “Frontiers of Religion and Gender” workshop, which was hosted by the NIRC on 2 March 2018. The NIRC subsequently helped to organize workshops on gender and religion in 2019 and 2021 (KAWAHASHI and KOBAYASHI 2021). In addition, while I was a visiting professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in 2022, we organized a symposium on “Frontiers of Religion and Gender” with the NIRC’s sponsorship. An expanded version of the symposium report, including personal narratives written by more than a dozen religious practitioners from diverse backgrounds and experiences, is forthcoming from the University of Hawai’i Press as part of the Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture series. I cannot thank *JJRS* editor Matthew McMullen enough for his continuing support of research on gender and religions in Japan.

Thanks in part to these efforts, research on gender and religion is growing and no longer occurs on the margins of academic discourse and practice in Japan. However, there remain structural issues that inhibit gender from becoming a central theme in scholarship on religion. For example, it is often the case that a volume will include no more than one chapter focused on gender, thus regarding the topic as merely supplemental. Worse, there is a tendency in Japanese religious studies to trivialize and undermine the gender theoretical turn without properly considering its significance or showing respect for the sincere efforts by gender and religion scholars. For example, in a recent roundtable discussion

1. For a record of this symposium, see NANZAN SHŪKYŌ BUNKA KENKYŪJO (1996).

2. For more information on this seminar, see KAWAHASHI (2014).

on the reconstruction of the history of Japanese religions, one of the male participants stated that, although he did not quite disagree with the importance of gender as an analytical concept, he could not imagine a gendered history of Japanese religion. He went on to say that the term “gender” was simply added to existing empirical research, and the argument ended up being an argument for the sake of it. Such a hasty and impressionistic assessment perpetuates the status quo of imbalances and oppression in lived religions regarding gender.³ Gender is a critical concept that articulates gender-related power structures as well as discrimination, and it exercises critical leverage on movements for social change.

About twenty years ago, I was invited to speak on a panel on the theme of lived Buddhism at an annual academic conference in Tokyo, where I presented a critique of the androcentrism of contemporary Buddhist organizations and the possibility of a gender-egalitarian restructuring of the religion. My criticism was dismissed by a senior male scholar in the academy, who was serving as a respondent to my presentation, as being purely emotional and lacking objective scholarship. I remember that Paul Swanson sympathized with me after the panel that the response was an inappropriate one, which only trivialized my presentation.

Even as gender is often a topic of academic events, these issues persist. At an ambitious symposium on Buddhist social ethics and gender held at a Buddhist university, an authoritative senior male scholar of religion (who is not an expert in gender studies) commented on the presentations of several female Buddhists, who are mostly activists. Disregarding the female presenters' argument that it is unfair that men unilaterally define women's roles in the temple and women are expected to conform to them, his comments implied that we should consider what the positive “role” of women in the Buddhist world should be. Moreover, despite the fact that the comments were obviously disappointing to the female presenters, the moderator (who was also a man) concluded the discussion by saying that they would continue to learn from the male respondent's wisdom as a guiding star in the field. As one might imagine, my colleagues and I were infuriated by these dismissive comments.

In 2017, the Japanese Association for Religious Studies established a Gender Equality and Young Scholars Support Committee. Kobayashi Naoko, Inose Yuri 猪瀬優理, and I among other members who work on religion and gender studies became involved in this committee. The committee had begun efforts to support gender justice. However, in 2007, when Komatsu Kayoko 小松加代子 took the lead in proposing that the association's policy should incorporate gender equality and submitted the proposal to the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society, it was rejected for being too political.⁴

3. For a more detailed account, see KAWAHASHI (2019, 41).

4. For more on the background of this incident, see KAWAHASHI, KOMATSU, and KUROKI (2013).

This is not solely a problem in the academy. As a founding member of a working group to promote gender equality and women's participation in the Sōtō school, I was surprised at the number of men in the organization who were unaware that women who do not enjoy the same privileges as men and are in fact disadvantaged by the male gender being the normative category in religion and society. We were concerned when, through questionnaires and other means,⁵ we came across statements that seemed to shift the responsibility to women, suggesting that women should not be allowed to practice at the head monastery (*honzan* 本山) because joint practices between men and women would cause sexual problems. Some male priests also tended to distort the Gender Gap Index, an international indicator that focuses on elements of discrimination against women. According to them, rankings produced by foreign institutions are meaningless, as cultures vary between different countries and ethnic groups. Some even said that gender boundaries are being blurred, as evidenced by the fact that LGBTQ is now a topic of public discourse, and that the trend of “privileging women against men” is simply reverse discrimination.

One clear reason for slow progress on gender equality as well as resistance in religious studies is the patriarchal nature of religious organizations upon which the academy is largely founded. It makes sense then that religious institutions and some male scholars are complicit in such patriarchal enterprises. Furthermore, it is undeniable that behind this tendency to suppress criticism of religious institutions and religious specialists from a gender perspective lies the “public interest of religion” discourse—that is, the contribution of religious organizations to society—that dominates both the media and the academy.

Many religious organizations prioritize public relations and are more concerned with their portrayal in the media than they are with resolving structural problems. For example, many groups have recently launched media campaigns that celebrate their approaches to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While such advertisements might serve to present these organizations in a positive light, they can also be cynical attempts to mask still unresolved social ills such as gender injustices that have long plagued religion in Japan. Furthermore, this type of discourse may come across as self-righteous attempts by male religious professionals in search of their own religious identities. Without critical assessment and reform, religious organizations will continue to have a negative impact on society at large in regards to gender equality policies, such as the promotion of separate surnames for married couples and protection of women's reproductive rights.⁶

5. The survey can be found at: https://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/post_sdgs/20240417_1.

6. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has issued a statement recommending guidelines permitting the option of separate surnames for married couples in Japan. However, a faction of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which is supported by the “religious right,” continues to oppose it.

Gender issues recently have attracted media attention, especially after the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三 (1954–2022). That is, there has been public criticism of the rightwing religious organization Tōitsu Kyōkai 統一教会 (Sekai Heiwa Tōitsu Katei Rengō 世界平和統一家庭連合; Unification Church) for promoting misogynous campaigns and backlash against gender equality (INOSE 2023). It can be said that progress has been made in that this incident has allowed criticisms of religion from a gender and feminist perspective—which traditionally have been silenced—to be recognized to a certain extent in the field of religious studies. Surprisingly, even male scholars who until now have been indifferent to gender issues have suddenly begun to be critical of genderbashing by rightwing religions.

The influence of religion on the maintenance and construction of gender is powerful, and therefore there is a need for us as researchers to take seriously the task of critically interrogating the relationship between religion and gender. Rather than irresponsible affirmation of religious organizations, accountable research on how to realize gender equality and equity in religion is required. Without fulfilling this responsibility, how can we advocate for the importance of the study of Japanese religions in Japan, a country that is no longer the shining star of area studies that it once was? Furthermore, while the study of Japanese religions is evolving and transforming in ways that are out of the hands of native Japanese researchers, it is not possible to engage in honest dialogue and criticism with the rest of the world from an equal standpoint if we are siloed by the Japanese language and engage in inward-looking discussions that circulate only within Japan. In this regard, it is of great significance that my colleagues and I have been able to collaborate with the NIRC and use the *JJRS* as a valuable venue to disseminate the results of religion and gender studies in Japan in English. I give the *JJRS* my unreserved compliments.

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