

# FEMINISM AND RELIGION

## *Recent Discussions and Personal Reflections*

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THE HISTORY of feminism and religion is now facing its fifth decade. The question of compatibility of the two distinct fields, however, has been a recurring issue. As the guest editors duly point out in the special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (JJRS) on feminism and religion in Japan published last year, “Men in religion have criticized movements by women seeking gender equality, saying that this manifests a lack of faith by women. In other words, they take the biased view that feminism and faith are mutually exclusive and essentially irreconcilable” (KAWAHASHI and KOBAYASHI 2017, 6). Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a Muslim feminist scholar based in Iran, has aptly termed this “mutually exclusive” view as “fundamentalist” versions of feminism and religion, noting that such a view does not only come from religion (RHOUNI 2009, 27). Feminists have long been suspicious, if not critical, of religion and its support for patriarchal practices, a point also concurred in another special issue of the JJRS on feminism and religion in Japan published in 2003. Here, the guest editors Kawahashi Noriko and Kuroki Masako refer to the debated oxymoronic nature of Islamic feminism, adding that in Japan, “feminist studies have been viewed as existing in an awkward relationship with religious studies” (KAWAHASHI and KUROKI 2003, 209).

The growing tendency, however, has been to somehow accommodate the two, recognizing the practices and desires of religious women who are more than ever conscious of their equal worth as human beings. Yet, there has been some musings, if not skepticisms, as to whether the liberal tendency of feminism is sufficient to capture the nature of women's religious experiences in all its variety and complexity. The controversial work of the anthropologist Saba Mahmood has been one of the most notable voices on this point. She notes how there has been a constant tendency to inscribe those moments of resistance or subversion that disrupt the patriarchal norm even when "an explicit *feminist* agency is difficult to locate" (MAHMOOD 2006, 183). Mahmood problematized such tendency in her study on the non-elite women who participated in the piety movement in Egypt (MAHMOOD 2011).

Coming from a specific location of the Muslim world, Mahmood's study not only questions the liberalist tendency of feminist approaches to religion but also how accurately the western world can understand the local experiences of women. Their voices are easily lost in the politics of representation. Therefore, in approaching these women's experiences there is a double task of honoring their voices while at the same time maintaining the significance of feminist politics. As Mark Rowe in his work on female Buddhist priests in Japan states, there is a sense of demand to go beyond Saba Mahmood to better "identify and explore the many forms that female Buddhist agency might take" (ROWE 2017, 90). Similar questions can be asked about other non-western religious traditions. And in response to such questions, my radical suggestion has been to leave the feminist label temporarily and perhaps go back to women. In other words, instead of trying to make "female" agency into "feminist" agency we could go deeper into the lived quality of women's religious experiences.

Such response certainly goes against the tide, as the editors of 2003 issue of the JJRS emphasize the necessity of using "feminism and religion" instead of "women and religion" (KAWAHASHI and KUROKI 2003, 207). In the 2017 issue of JJRS, the editors reaffirm this necessity stating that "gender" is not synonymous with "women" and conflation of the terms is problematic as it elides the structural nature of women's experiences, oppression included (KAWAHASHI and KOBAYASHI 2017, 2). In this essay, I want to defend my position by way of situating my research on two Korean women writers within the context of disciplinary topography in the hopes that it may shed some light on the benefits of taking a step back from feminism. After all, there are many more women who identify themselves as women than as feminists. If women themselves are reluctant to own the title, and if it is women with whom we are concerned primarily, then it may not be such a loss to take this strategic move. It may also tell us something about religion that gets elided in our academic endeavors. Finally, I would like

to close with some notes on how this approach informs the ways in which I conduct my research on Japanese women in comparison with Korean women.

## Religion, Feminism, and Disciplinary Topography: The Case of Confucian Feminism

In its forty or so years of history, the disciplinary study of feminism and religion has seen many developments, overcoming the oxymoronic tones of such terms as Islamic feminism and Evangelical feminism. And as if there is no end to this unlikely coinage, the most recent one that I have encountered is Confucian feminism. Its scope and influence are not as wide as Islamic feminism, since those countries that can claim a Confucian tradition or heritage are limited to a few East Asian countries, most notably China and Korea. However, Confucian feminism has now become an official discourse, and the ways in which it is generated and/or received in China and Korea will shed light on how claiming a “feminist” agency can be limiting in representing the complexity of women’s experiences within the tradition.

For much of the twentieth century, Confucianism, or the Confucian tradition, was portrayed as the culprit that brought failure to China and Korea in the face of the imperial powers, keeping them tied to the feudalistic tradition without any resource to reinvent themselves in the face of modernization.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it would be no surprise that, as many scholars agree, its status today in religious studies has in part to do with the regained confidence of East Asian countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. With the economic success of these countries in the late 1980s and 1990s, scholars from the region have looked back on Confucian ethics and compared it with Protestant ethics, which has been argued as “instrumental in the development of modern capitalism in Europe” (SUN 2013, 83). Confucian ethics was claimed as a similar driving force behind the economic success of the East Asian countries.

Reinstating Confucianism, religious or otherwise, however, may not have had such widespread effect in religious studies without the participation of mainland China. As summarized by the religion scholar Anna Xiao Dong Sun,

1. Scholars in this field are in agreement that the term “Confucianism” is problematic. It is “an amorphous and ahistorical concept,” to quote Ko et al. (2003, 3). The term, however, is still kept rather than replaced or discarded, perhaps because, as Ko et al. state, “[it] still exercises enormous rhetorical power on scholarly and popular minds” (2003, 3). In relation to feminism, Vivian-lee Nyitray provided a helpful outline of what is at least unanimously agreed among scholars: “Confucian traditions [are] deeply rooted in, and expressive of, a distinctively patriarchal familialism” (NYITRAY 2010, 145). However, Ko et al. are careful to nuance this statement claiming that while there has been “hierarchical structures in political, familial, and textual realms that perpetuated male dominance,” it is important not to fall into “the nationalist formulation of woman-as-victim, for it denies historical women their agency and precludes explorations of their subjectivities” (Ko et al., 2003, 4)

since the early twenty-first century, China has increasingly become aware of “the importance of identifying Confucianism, or Confucius, as a unifying element in Chinese society.” Confucianism, Sun explains, “is needed for the representation of a Chinese national culture in the global context, and it is also needed for the centering of the increasingly shaky collective sense of morality in the country’s fast transition into market economy and capitalism” (SUN 2013, 102). According to Sun, such sentiment has been widely expressed by the participation of private donors, government projects that aim at global level, and grassroots movements of reading the Confucian classics.

Interestingly, although Confucianism has conventionally been understood and represented as oppressive to women, in contemporary China women are one of the major players in reviving Confucianism. Yet, Sun notes that feminist scholarly works on Confucianism have been mostly carried out by scholars in the west, not by those in mainland China. This fact has important implication for what feminist consciousness might mean in a non-western context. In her study, Sun suggests three aspects in which one can see the role of women in reviving Confucianism in mainland China: the influential role of Yu Dan, a female college professor in the “popular remaking of Confucianism as a philosophy for everyday life,” female scholars’ contribution to the study of Confucianism, and women’s active participation in Confucian rituals (SUN 2013, 140).

In the case of Yu Dan, Sun states that while the significance of gender politics combined with the capitalist media industry cannot be denied in her popularity, Yu Dan herself does not claim any gender consciousness. As for the female scholars’ contribution to the study of Confucianism, Sun importantly notes that more female scholars in the field do not automatically translate into feminist engagement. And yet taking together these two phenomena with the visibly large participation of women in Confucian rituals of venerating the sage, venerating their ancestors, and even praying to Confucius for personal good fortune, Sun asks “Is Confucianism coming to terms with feminism in a postsocialist, postfeminist China” (SUN 2013, 151)? However, as she has already noted, proving the relevance of feminism to Confucianism may be more of a concern for those scholars who reside in the west or have affiliation with the west than those who are in mainland China.

A telling example can be seen in Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, one of the major feminist scholars working on Confucianism. In arguing for the feminist appropriation of Confucianism, she first affirms that “Confucianism has been the most dominant intellectual tradition in the Chinese world,” and thus “the feminist rejection of Confucianism amounts to the proclamation of the superiority of Western theories insofar as the issue of gender parity is concerned” (ROSENLEE 2010, 175). Rosenlee further notes that feminist intervention in Confucianism is also necessary for Confucianism itself to survive in the twenty-first century,

which in turn will provide grounds for feminists of Confucian tradition to claim their feminist identity without any apology toward their cultural heritage (ROSENLEE 2010, 187). Such tension between a feminist identity and one's cultural/religious heritage has a long history, in which national policies play a large part. Many non-western countries have shown some reservations as to ratifying the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the rationale was usually in the name of protecting the national tradition and custom. Thus, feminists from non-western origins often find themselves in a tough spot trying to prove that feminism is not western while at the same time struggling to find ways to articulate and name a type of feminism that is not liberal and not western.

Eunkang Koh in her article "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?" illustrates how such tension can divide feminists into two factions (KOH 2008). During the crucial years leading to the abolition of the family-head system (*hojujē* 戶主制) in 2005, the existing tension between Confucianism and feminism came to its full force.<sup>2</sup> While most agreed that some reform was needed with the family law, many also looked to Confucianism as their cultural heritage that has the resource to confront the influences of western individualism, which was seen as one of the causes of disintegration of the Korean community. Those who, including Koh, believe that Confucianism is "an integral aspect of Korean culture" argue that the feminist appropriation of the tradition is crucial and possible (KOH 2008, 345). They even propose Confucian feminism as a way of constructing Korean feminism. However, mainline feminists refuted that such a move is to fall yet again into the binary opposition of the west versus other worlds, ignoring the political processes through which the two groups came to be identified as such. This latter group sees no possibility in reconciling feminism with Confucianism. To quote Kang Namsoon, a feminist theologian and one of the strongest voices against Confucianism, "Why should feminists understand Confucianism when it is the most obvious obstacle to the liberation of Korean women" (KOH 2008, 347)?

Important to note is the fact that such refutation of Confucianism has a religious background. When Confucianism was unanimously targeted as a backward tradition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korea, it was arguably the Christian faith rather than the secular enlightenment ideas that inspired early Korean feminists. Some of the earliest voices of modern feminism

2. The family-head system had been the foundation of family law in Korea, which was introduced in 1953 and lasted until 2005. The abolition of this system has been one of the main focuses of women's movement during the 1990s, and between the years 1998 and 2001 feminists and Confucianists met in several rounds of discussion but never came to an agreement (KOH 2008, 347-9).

in Korea based its legitimacy on the faith in God who allowed women the same salvation as men. And as Christianity became one of the major religions in Korea in the latter half of the twentieth century, feminist intervention in religion was most visible in liberal Protestantism, and along with secular feminists they refuted the Confucian tradition as the major cause of women's oppression in Korea. Thus, when Kang claims that Confucianism lacks the resource to remake itself in the way Christianity did, and that its influence on the Korean churches is debilitating, she is speaking from this historical location (KANG 2016).

For Korean feminists, Confucianism is a tradition that should have been dead a long time ago, and its revival only reflects the growing conservatism around the world. The appeal to Asian or Korean values is a warning sign that another attempt is being made to stall women's rights in the name of tradition and custom. Thus, those women who believe that Confucianism can be remade with feminist values find more voice within the English-speaking world than in Korea.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that there are no female scholars in Korea who approach the Confucian tradition with revisionist ideas, nor to say that Korean feminists in the English-speaking world are all supportive of Confucianism, but that self-identified feminists in Korea, religious or not, predominantly believe that Confucianism is not compatible with feminism. Therefore, while the context is widely different, in both Korea and China, feminist scholarly works on Confucianism are better received in the western context.

So far, I have briefly looked at the relatively late coming of Confucian feminism to the field of feminism and religion, focusing on two main countries that have the strongest tradition of Confucianism, Korea and China. Interestingly, in both cases feminist scholarship on Confucianism is mostly carried out in the west, but in the case of China it is so despite the wide voluntary participation of women in the tradition, and in the case of Korea it is so because feminists have rejected it even though Korean women are still largely formed through this historical tradition, albeit in hybrid with other values.

Before I close this section, I want to raise a point made by Vivian-Lee Nyitray as to how affirming the religiosity of Confucianism would help with its feminist analysis. In reviewing three titles on feminism and Confucianism, among which Rosenlee's work is included, Nyitray insightfully states that "In neglecting any religious character of Confucianism, the authors hamper their analyses by situating Confucianism in opposition to a monolithic and generic or only slightly differentiated liberal Western feminism" (NYITRAY 2010, 159). Apparently, none of the authors in her review affirmed that Confucianism is a religion, which

3. One of the recent examples can be seen in McWEENY and BUTNOR 2014. Two authors have contributed chapters on Confucianism, a Korean scholar Ranjoo Seodu Herr and a Chinese-American scholar Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee. Herr also contributed a chapter in FOUST and TAN, 2016.

is actually not an unusual practice. However, Nyitray claims that it is because the authors do not affirm Confucianism as a religion that they fail to reach a full feminist analysis. Especially in the case of Rosenlee, Nyitray claims that she “operates from a sense that ‘Confucian feminist’ is oxymoronic,” adding that it need not be given that various religious traditions have joined the word feminism to itself. Nyitray refers to orthodox Jewish feminists as those who may share similar experiences with Confucian feminists, “such as the emphasis on home and family as locus of religious practice; the ritual role of the mother; or differential and gendered education” (NYITRAY 2010, 160).

I agree with Nyitray as to the importance of seeing Confucianism as a religion. As she stated elsewhere, “Recognizing Confucianism as a religious system accounts for the inherent power and seeming ‘naturalness’ of its values, and for the longevity of its deeply rooted symbolic nature” (NYITRAY 2000, 195). However, her suggestion that Confucian feminists may have much to share with orthodox Jewish feminists is still a reflection of liberalist tendency in the feminist study of religion, because she is implying that despite the widely different nature of the two religions—one is a monotheistic religion and the other is at best a “diffused religion” (VOLF 2015, 226)—its women members can still be brought together under the shared experiences of women’s oppression. In other words, their experiences as women surpass their experiences as members of a particular religion. While I agree that women do share a lot of experiences, such a claim will only take us back to the initial point I made in the essay. It is still an effort to locate “feminist” agency that unites, or should unite, all women in their struggle against patriarchy.

As the following case studies will show, experiences with different religions may have a greater significance than women’s shared experiences of oppression. In other words, for some women religion can mean more than feminism. The writers of my research were critical of the Confucian tradition in Korea that gave greater value to sons over daughters, but when they converted to Catholicism, their experiences with its religious nature led them to not raise feminist issues in the Catholic Church.

## How Far Can Feminism Take Me? Religious Belief and Feminist Consciousness

As noted above, the religion of Christianity played a crucial role in refuting Confucianism as a Korean tradition. And those who played a major role in bringing feminism to religion were liberal Protestants. Feminist intervention in religion remained within that relatively small circle for most of the twentieth century. On the other hand, there were also those who refuted Confucianism but were more or less content to remain a conservative Christian, and they were the majority.

A general sentiment among educated women in the late twentieth century was that Confucianism was *the* cause of mistreatment of women. But for the majority of women, this criticism did not enter into the realm of their Christian faith. Or, perhaps it did in the forms of negotiation that opened up the possibility for both resistance and re-domestication, as discussed by Kelly H. CHONG in her book *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea* (2008). However, studying the lives of Park Wansuh (1931–2011) and Gong Jiyoung (b. 1963) led me to a different conclusion. Rather than read their lives in the frame of resistance and subversion, I listened to their religious desire, which for them meant more than feminist politics.

Park Wansuh was born during the colonial rule of Japan in 1931. She was among a few women in Korea at the time to receive higher education due to the zeal of her mother to raise her as a “new woman” 新女性, a term used at the time to describe modernized women as opposed to traditional women. But soon after she started her freshman year at Seoul National University, the Korean War (1950–1953) broke out, and she became the breadwinner for her family comprised of her mother, sister-in-law, and two young nephews. Her elder brother was a casualty of the war. But, she soon escaped that role, married a man who ran a small business of his own, and settled down as a middle-class housewife raising five children. She became a writer in 1970 at the age of thirty-nine by winning a writing competition organized by a woman’s magazine. She wrote about her experience of the war. She then quickly became a leading writer and one of the few women writers who made way for the unprecedented growth of women writers in the 1990s.

Park’s feminist consciousness was already embedded in her by her mother, who went against her parents-in-law to give Park an equal education to that of Park’s brother. When Park decided to get married instead of going back to school after the war, she was concerned that it disappointed her mother but was happy to get away from the pressure. When she later became a writer, she was relieved that she was finally able to make her mother proud.

The initiation of the UN Decade for Women in 1975 had its influence in Korea, and Park began to become more vocal about feminism. In the year 1980, she wrote a feminist novel titled *Beginning of a New Life*. In the novel, she criticizes the wifely virtue 婦德 of Confucianism that became a shackle to women. She justifies divorce on the grounds that a family based on such unjust relations need not, and should not, be upheld as a worthy tradition. In 1985, she wrote another feminist novel titled *Woman on Her Feet*. In this novel, she highlights the deep-seated nature of gender discrimination and questions the possibility of equal marriage. However, in questioning this possibility, Park somehow defends the institution of marriage as something that requires more respect than what the protagonist has been willing to give. The protagonist thought that by mar-



rying beneath her—in other words, marrying a college friend who came from a lower class than her—she would have easy access to an equal marriage. But she fails, not only because gender discrimination had deep roots that cannot be easily overturned, but also, according to Park, because she tried to bypass the hard work that is required to make marriage truly equal.

Then in 1988, Park wrote another feminist novel, *Are You Still Dreaming?* in a concerted effort with the women's movement to challenge the family-head system. She portrays the life of a single mother who later had to face her child's father in a lawsuit over the custody of the child. The father at first denied he was the father when she notified him of her pregnancy, but later changed his mind when he failed to have a son in his own marriage and found out that in this previous relationship he had actually fathered a son. However, he loses the case because the protagonist was able to produce a letter in court, which she had received from the child's father denying his paternity. She had somehow kept it all those years. In this novel, Park challenges the family-head system, but maintains her belief in the virtuous character as one of the core values of family. In other words, the right to raise the child goes to the mother because good education is not just something that could be bought with money of which the father had plenty. It is more about having a respectable character as the parent.

Then in 1991, Park wrote *Dreaming Incubator* to expose sex-selective abortion, which was widely practiced at the time, of its criminal nature. In all these novels, Park reflected on current feminist issues, rightly criticizing the popularized Confucian gender norm in Korea, most visible in its history of son preference. As a mother of five children of which four were girls, the issue hit her close to home. But Park did not problematize the institution of family or marriage itself. In fact, she believed that family was a religious unit. She writes,

Family is not just a community of blood relations or a loving couple. It is the ethical norm that governs our consciousness and actions. We resist evil temptations in order not to worry the family, and we earn money honestly, try to do meaningful work, and accomplish academic and artistic achievements to bring joy to the family. Family is also a place where you learn how to love...People who have no affection between siblings cannot love their neighbors. (PARK 2015, 102–3)

This statement reflects how Confucian she was in her understanding of the family. And because of this belief perhaps, she also believed that men and women were essentially different and had different roles in the family. She was concerned that feminists were becoming masculinized and, although she sympathized with them, she gradually grew apart from the feminist movement, calling herself a humanist rather than a feminist. Her daughter recalled that people tend to think that her mother was a committed feminist because of what she wrote, but in her

family life she treated her husband like a king, not failing to prepare his dinner with her own hands even when they had help in the house.

Park converted to Catholicism in 1984 at the age of fifty-three, only after she was sure that she was not neglecting filial piety to her mother-in-law by converting. She needed a religion that permitted rituals for ancestor veneration and also would assure her that her mother-in-law would not end up in hell because she was not a Christian. Catholicism in Korea at the time provided her both. Park's conversion was not dramatic. She was looking for a noble way to age and thought that having a religion might help in that respect. She at one time went to a Catholic funeral and wanted such a funeral for herself later. She claimed that she was drawn to the character of Jesus, although she did not believe in the virgin birth, his miracles, or his resurrection.

She saw a humanistic model to follow in Jesus who extended love beyond the lovable, that is, beyond the boundary of family and friends. She also found him appealing because of the way he treated women. But she did not challenge or question the hierarchically gendered nature of the Catholic Church. She greatly admired Cardinal Kim Soowhan (1922–2009) and was proud that a group of Catholic priests were vocal about democratization of Korea. But, she was mostly silent about gender issues in the church. She was well aware how priests were more honored in the Church than nuns. However, describing how she was more touched by the warmth of the nuns than the authority of the priests, she expressed her belief that in God's world he would have different values than that of our own society. Such a dualistic understanding of this world and other world has been noted as one of the major causes of justifying the unequal gender relation in the Church, and even though Park was not a firm believer in a literal heaven, she nevertheless maintained this dualistic view regarding gender.

The meaning of religion for Park might explain such different modes of engagement regarding gender. As with any conversion story, the narrative develops with time and there are multiple factors which are selectively highlighted depending on the narrating context. For Park, the defining shift in her narrative came with her experience of bereavement. In 1988, when she was fifty-seven, she lost both her husband and her son within three months. Her husband died of lung cancer, and after three months her son died of an accident. He was only twenty-five. Losing her son was a devastating experience, and through this experience she came to understand the deeper meaning of prayer. It did not matter that this God was the father and not the mother. What mattered was that she had the Other to whom she could pray in her suffering. It was this element she later noted as the crucial difference between Confucianism and Christianity.

In the end, Park did not see Confucianism as the cause of women's oppression. Her grandfather was a self-made Confucian scholar who taught Chinese classics to village boys. He allowed Park to become one of his students, which

she later acknowledged as a radical move comparable to Jesus' encounters with women. Once she distanced herself from the feminist movement, she more readily accepted Confucianism as a noble tradition capable of teaching human beings in the right way but only lacking the deity that she found in Christianity.

Gong Jiyoung was born in 1963 to an upper middle-class family as the seventy-eighth generation of Confucius. She was the youngest and the rebellious one in the family, challenging the gendered role imposed on her because she was a girl. As a primary school student, she was already influenced by the changing mood of society as Korea saw its version of Second Wave feminism in the 1970s. For Gong, going to a Catholic church nearby was an outlet, and its religiosity appealed to her. She was active in the youth service and was confirmed at fifteen. However, college changed her life. She became active in the democratization movement that swept over most of the college campuses in Korea. She left the church because she thought it was not radical enough in supporting the movement. (She came back eighteen years later.) During this period her feminist consciousness was inseparable from class struggle. She identified with the poor and entered a training program to secretly work as a union activist in urban factories as one of its employees. But only after a month of being employed as a factory worker, her identity was exposed and she was fired. And then while she was participating in one of the street demonstrations protesting against the government, she was arrested and spent ten days in a prison cell alone in the coldest days of winter in 1987. This experience changed her life once again, and she left activism to become a writer.

She was already married to a fellow activist when she was going through this tumultuous period. However, her marriage experience made her realize how fighting for democracy did not do much to change unequal gender relations. This was a common experience among her female peers, who fought with their male colleagues for democracy believing that they were equal. Gong had a daughter from that marriage, but ended up divorcing her husband after six years. And then she wrote a novel, *Go Alone Like a Rhino's Horn* (1993), to explore this issue of unequal marriage. The novel was a huge success and suddenly made her very famous and rich, which led to envious responses from her colleagues. The novel was soon made into a movie, and the director of that movie became her second husband.

*Go Alone Like a Rhino's Horn* follows the story of three women who are college friends. It starts with the news of a suicide attempt of one of these women, and it ends with her final and successful attempt. The strength of this novel is that Gong portrays a normal marriage in order to argue that it does not take domestic violence to suck the life out of a woman. The traditional marriage institution itself is suffocating to women, especially because they were led to believe that men and women were equal. They received equal education. They

were comrades in their fight for democracy. But when they married, they became second class human beings.

In her personal life, however, Gong did not give up on marriage. She married three times because, according to Gong, she had conservative sexual ethics. She believed that sex was only permissible within marriage, and, therefore, when the relationship grew intimate, she got married. And from each of her marriages she had a child. Thus, Gong's feminism worked within this frame of normative heterosexual marriage, with which she was not very successful. After her second divorce, Gong wrote her second feminist novel, *Good Woman* (1997), to further explore how heterosexual relations might be made more equal.

Gong's marriage to the film director was the most short-lived and painful one. She experienced domestic violence, but because she was now well known as a feminist writer she was asked to give talks on feminism. She describes it as a humiliating experience when she had to give such talks on the day she was beaten. She divorced after two years and wrote *Good Woman*. One might not see in this novel a specifically feminist theme, because Gong tries to show through the protagonist how women have different qualities than men and how that quality can work as a strength. By this time, Gong came to see feminism as too aggressive and wanted to honor feminine qualities such as a mother's nurturing nature. However, it was not well received among mainline feminists.

Gong was often criticized by the critics and feminists alike for her sentimental portrayals of romantic heterosexual relationships. She was also criticized for her pro-life position. Although she herself had an abortion while she was estranged from the church, she did not endorse it as a right, which is consistent with her involvement in abolishing capital punishment in Korea. In the end, although Gong wrote one of the representative feminist novels of the late twentieth century, she claims that she is not a feminist and that she is politically liberal but sexually conservative. She also believes that men and women are essentially different. Such belief in essential difference comes not so much from her Christian faith but from her experience of raising two boys and a girl. She tried to raise them gender neutral, but soon had to give up the experiment because it was not working.

Gong returned to her Christian faith in her late thirties. About two years after her third marriage to a college professor, she had a supernatural encounter with the Christian deity and was eventually reconfirmed into the Catholic Church. This supernatural encounter came when she was yet again struggling with her marriage. In this marriage also, she experienced domestic violence, but she stayed for seven years because now she felt her faith required it. However, she finally ended it but without losing her faith. In effect, her faith was stronger than ever. She experienced total acceptance from her God, and that was enough.

Gong, like Park, was aware of the hierarchically gendered nature of the church, but like Park, she took a dualistic approach and differentiated between the human institution of the Church and God himself. She believed that Church was like a school. You learn about God, but it is not God himself. And like Park, Gong does not believe in a literal heaven, claiming that she does not care if heaven exists or not. The total acceptance she experienced in this life was enough, and this was the meaning of religion for Gong.

Within feminism, she was criticized and judged. She was envied. But, her Christian faith gave her the strength to be herself. It did not matter for her whether women were not ordained as priests and bishops. She found enough resources in her tradition to empower her, for example in women like Teresa of Avila. Feminism did not carry her all the way, but her faith did.

It would be too simplistic to claim that these women did not take their feminist consciousness into their faith. They may have parted ways with “feminism,” a perceivably constructed entity—or something that is objectivated, to use a sociological term—with its own history and discourse, but they inevitably involve all of who they are as persons when they come to religion. And in that person is the writer who wrote about feminist issues. It was part of their experience as women. However, in their religious faith, patriarchy, gender inequality, oppression of women, and the sorts are not their main language, even though they were familiar with those terms. Rather, religion gave them strength to journey on in the midst of suffering. It also affirmed them as individuals. In their faith, they experienced both acceptance and encouragement. In their religion, they chose to settle with the resources they found rather than criticize it of its patriarchal nature. To quote Mahmood again, in their narrative of religious experiences, it was hard to locate “an explicit *feminist* agency.”

One could venture to define agency in different ways to make it feminist. And that is what non-western forms of feminism have been struggling to achieve. It has been explained as appropriation, negotiation, and sometimes even as survival strategies. These are all true, but how does that make women’s experiences feminist in a way that is different from other human struggles? This is not to ignore gendered experiences. Having different bodies will inevitably mean different experiences. But when does it become feminist, and when does it not, if we are looking at the same women’s experiences? Doesn’t much of it depend on the location of the researcher? Going back to the discussion on Confucian feminism, if those who, one way or another, feel the need to make Confucianism feminist are those who are somehow conscious of the western discourse, are we not then still operating under western assumptions? And how can we not, given the long history of colonialism? If what poststructuralists have been saying is true, then we do not stand outside the structure, but we become ourselves by being *in* the structure. If so, what are we to say about Korean feminists who

refuse to engage with our Confucian tradition?<sup>4</sup> Are they somehow immune to the cultural meaning systems through which they became subjects?

Given the situation, wouldn't it be better, then, to take a good look at women's experiences once again and listen, loosening our grips just a little bit with feminist politics? The politics of listening has been widely supported by feminists after the challenge of poststructuralist critique, but there still seems to be a pressing need to listen selectively for specifically feminist agency in the liberal sense of resistance and subversion. The question I raise is how beneficial it would be to maintain such a position when studying religious experiences of women in non-western worlds.

### Religion and Women's Status: Japan and South Korea

In my observation, feminist scholars of religion face a certain tension between the subjective experiences of empowerment and objective measurements of gender equality. Mahmood's work was controversial because she temporarily distanced herself from the agendas of feminist politics to give greater emphasis to what women themselves feel about their religion. Such a step would be more or less equivalent to going back to "women and religion" rather than pursuing "gender and religion." Liberal-minded feminists, on the other hand, would be reluctant to acknowledge subjective experiences of empowerment unless it translates into measurable gender equality, which usually comes down to status and money. They are more concerned with how much women share in the privileges predominately enjoyed by men—the underlying assumption here is that *all* men enjoyed privilege regardless of social status—and therefore are often impatient with women who seem to endorse traditional gender roles. Of course, religious feminists have been active in promoting peace and endorsing life-giving practices. But they seem to share a sense of frustration with their non-religious sisters when "women themselves are resistant to embracing their own liberation." And these women are often seen as obstacles to "our plans for progress" (CRISPIN 2017, 11).

Japan and South Korea are both ranked near the bottom of the list when it comes to the gender gap index in contrast to their ranks in the level of economic development.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have argued various reasons for such imbalances; some

4. In a recent interview with *Gospel and Context* 복음과상황, a Korean Christian magazine, Kang Namsoon contrasts Korean society with American society claiming that, while Korean society is helpless in solving conflicts because it is authoritarian and hierarchical, American society has embodied a democratic process based on rationalism and egalitarianism (OH 2018). Such a stance would explain why she is so critical of Confucianism. It also explains how much she is reliant on western liberalism. Kang started her teaching career in Korea, but she now teaches at Texas Christian University.

5. According the Global Gender Gap report of 2017 by the World Economic Forum, Japan ranked

suggest their cultural heritage of Confucianism, and some suggest the state-led modernization process that adopted a gender segregation policy (STEEL and KABASHIMA 2008, 133–7). However, diffused as it is, if Confucianism is a religion its influence would be stronger and more extensive than we would expect it to be. In other words, its religious nature could mean something more for women than feminist subversion.

For example, feminists in Japan and South Korea have long criticized the ideal of “good wife, wise mother” 良妻賢母, a combination of “existing Confucian principles and ... newly introduced Western concepts” adopted in the late nineteenth century (AMBROS 2015, 116). It has been the most powerful discourse behind gender segregation policy. The phrase now sounds outdated, and no educated women would think that this is the ideal they should follow. But when I see the “women only” car in the subway in both Japan and South Korea, I wonder about the sustained influence of this gender segregation policy. Korean subways introduced the same separate car for women before I went to the US five years ago, and while I was living in Korea it didn’t seem so strange. But when I first saw it in Japan after four and a half years of my stay in the US, my immediate response was “Isn’t that discrimination?” It read like a sign that said, “I temporarily withhold my right to ride in which ever car I want in order not to be sexually harassed.” Does that mean that I am to be blamed for sexual harassment when I am not in the “women only” car? And also, what if I am a lesbian?

These responses came up all at the same time without even thinking. It was a typically liberal-minded western response that fitted the physical environment—a western academia in Southern California—that I had inhabited for several years. But soon my initial response died away, because what I saw in the subway fit in with what I saw around me. It was a way of life that made things work in a different way. Its details are never neat and there are always conflicts, and even pain. But it is a way of life that women struggle to make sense of drawing on what resources they have from their cultural values and religious symbols. And I think it would be more helpful, when listening to these women’s struggles, to temporarily distance feminism from religion so as to be freed from the pressure to locate “feminist” agency. After all, it is not feminists’ but women’s experiences with which we are concerned, in all their faiths, cultures, and practices.

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114 out of 144 countries and South Korea 118. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2017.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf). Accessed 4/24/2018. In 2013, it was 105 for Japan and 111 for Korea out of 136 countries. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2013.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf). Accessed 4/24/2018. It shows how these two countries have continued to rank quite low in the gender gap index. China, on the other hand, dropped from rank 69 in 2013 to rank 100 in 2017, coming closer to Japan and South Korea.

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