

REPORT

# RELIGION AND GENDER WORKSHOP



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*The following is a summary of the third meeting of the “Forefront of Religion and Gender,” a workshop hosted by the Gender and Religion Research Center at Ryukoku University on 2 March 2021. This article is a translation of the Japanese version of the summary available in the Shohō (2021).*

We would like to begin by briefly touching on previous gatherings of the “Forefront of Religion and Gender” workshops held at the Nanzan Institute of Religion and Culture (NIRC). The first workshop, held on 2 March 2018, was inspired by the 2017 publication of a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 44/1 (JJRS) entitled “Gendering Religious Practices in Japan,” which was in turn based on the 2016 publication of *Religion and Gender Politics: A Feminist Anthropological Perspective* (Shōwadō) edited by Kawahashi Noriko and Komatsu Kayoko. The special issue of the JJRS, edited by Kawahashi and Kobayashi Noriko, includes articles and book reviews examining Buddhism, Christianity, mountain worship, new religions, and spirituality from a critical perspective regarding gender. This dissemination of recent studies on religion and gender in Japan made an impact on the fields of Religious and Gender Studies, but our activities continued beyond the publication of the special issue. The JJRS volume made us realize that we needed to be more active in promoting the ongoing study of religion and gender. For this reason, we decided to hold a workshop at the NIRC to provide an opportunity for scholars involved in the special issue to present their research. This was the beginning of a series of workshops on the “Forefront of Religion and Gender.”

The first workshop featured presentations by Heawon Yang, then a visiting researcher at NIRC, on the topic of “Can Religion and Feminism Really Meet? Some Thoughts on the Recent Discussions in the US,” and Murayama Yumi, who contributed a book review for the JJRS special issue, on “From Fashionable Gods to Missionaries: Shifts in ‘Religion’ and Konkōkyō Female Missionaries.” The two presentations provided an opportunity to rethink the effectiveness of various strategies for mainstreaming critical perspectives on gender into the study of religion without being swallowed up by the backlash. For more on this issue, see Murayama’s essay “Is Feminism Necessary for Us?” in the *Nanzan Shūkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo Kenkyū Shohō* 29, especially the concluding section.

The second workshop, “Forefront of Religion and Gender II” held on 27 June 2019, featured a talk by Kudō Marie, who also contributed to the JJRS special issue, on “Grappling with Christology: An Attempt at a Feminist and Queer Theology,” and Yokoi Momoko, a postdoc researcher at NIRC, who presented on “Considering Buddhism and Gender through an International Comparison: Being Aware of the Roles of Women in Temple Families.” In their responses to the talks, Murayama and Kawamata Toshinori discussed how women can practice religion, which is often restrictive and oppressive, while resisting and sometimes overcoming it from within.

As mentioned above, the publication of *Religion and Gender Politics* and the editing of the special issue of the JJRS led to two workshops at the NIRC. Along with these activities, Kawahashi and Yokoi also contributed to the volume *Buddhism and Women in Modern Japan: Crossing Cultural Boundaries and Gender* (Hōzōkan, 2019) edited by Nasu Eishō, Honda Aya, and Ōmi Toshihiro as part a series organized by the Ryukoku University Center for Buddhist Culture in Asia. Kawahashi and Kobayashi also contributed to a special issue of the Nihon Shūkyō Gakkai’s journal (*Shūkyō kenkyū* 93/2) along with Inose Yuri and Komatsu Kayoko, who also wrote for the JJRS special issue, as well as Minesaki Hiroko, who contributed to the volume on *Religion and Gender Politics*. It has been thirty years since the first special issue on “Religion and Women” was published in 1989, and this publication has brought renewed attention to the study of religion and gender.

In the middle of this activity, Ryukoku University called for applications for the “2020 Priority Research Promotion Project,” and we decided to apply to establish the Research Center for Gender and Religion (GGRC) with Iwata Mami (Shinshū Studies) as its representative. The application was accepted, and the GGRC was founded in April 2020. In addition to Iwata as the director and Kawahashi, Kobayashi, Komatsu, Inose, Murayama, and Minesaki as researchers, Anna Ruggieri Takeshita, who presented at the “Forefront of Religion and Gender III” workshop, and Honda Aya, one of the editors of the

aforementioned Buddhism and Women in Modern Japan volume, were added as researchers based in the Kinki region.

As the above overview demonstrates, the decision to co-sponsor “Forefront of Religion and Gender Studies” with the GGRC was not a matter of chance. The result of the steady accumulation of research on religion and gender, such as the publication of the JJRS special issue in 2017 and previous workshops, led to the establishment of the GGRC and the decision to host this year’s workshop jointly with NIRC.

### This Year’s Workshop

The GGRC is organized into four units. The purpose of the first unit, represented by Shimizu Kōsuke (Professor, Faculty of International Studies, Ryukoku University) is to promote the study of religion and gender from a global perspective, and as a part of this agenda was charged with organizing this year’s workshop hosted by the GGRC and the NIRC. The two presenters of the workshop were Anna Ruggieri Takeshita of Kyoto University of Foreign Studies and Fujimoto Takuya, Deputy Director of the Konkōkyō International Center. Tim Graf of the NIRC and Komatsu Kayoko of Tama University served as respondents.

In the first presentation, “The Rinzai Zen Position on Gender in the Edo Period,” Ruggieri Takeshita analyzed the works of Hakuin Zenji (1686–1769), reviver of the Rinzai school in Japan. Based on Hakuin’s terminology in these works, Ruggieri Takeshita discussed the issues female Zen practitioners encountered during the Edo period. The early modern period in Japan was a status-based society, with the basic unit being the patriarchal “household.” In this context, women could not represent such a “household” but were subordinated to a male patriarch. Moreover, with the proliferation of Confucian thought, male domination over women became a pillar of society, and women were unable to act on their own will.

Religion was also responsible for the creation of such social conditions, and some Buddhist concepts were directly involved in the oppression of women. In particular, the presenter pointed out that doctrines such as “the five hindrances to meritorious rebirths for women,” “the three subordinations of women to father, husband, and son,” “the transformation of women into men,” and “impure water” (an euphemism for menstruation) led to discrimination against nuns, thus contributing to their suffering. Furthermore, the so-called “Nun’s Palace,” established in the latter half of the fourteenth century by elites at imperial nunneries, played a major role in the social function of nunneries in the Edo period. In this context, the presenter noted the important role that temples such as Hokyōji, which was associated with Hakuin, and Tōkeiji, which

was known as an *enkiridera* (a temple where women could “cut off” connections with their husbands) or a *kakekomidera* (a temple for women “fleeing” their husbands), had for women at the time. This presentation as well as Tim Graf’s response can be found in the *Bulletin’s* Japanese-language counterpart, the *Shohō* (2021).

In the next presentation, “Aspects of Gender/Sexuality in Konkōkyō,” Fujimoto Takuya utilized the theory of “interpellation,” specifically as articulated by Louis Althusser and Judith Butler, to examine the conversion of Ogihara Sugi during the founding of Konkōkyō from the perspective of religious subjectivation. According to Althusser, power calls to the individual. The individual is drawn to this power, submitting and becoming subordinate to its ideology; that is, it subjectifies the individual. Butler redefined this process as a reflective turn toward the self, the formation of a sense of guilt, and the construction of an ethical subject. Fujimoto stated that if we apply both of these notions of interpellation to religion as a turning toward a transcendental call, we can understand Ogihara’s transformation into a religious person as a submission to transcendence. Moreover, the fact that her husband, who was converted prior to Ogihara, did not determine the object of worship on behalf of the household but was urged by the founder of Konkōkyō to consult with the family demonstrates that Ogihara maintained her own religious identity. Furthermore, Yasumaru Yoshio found the emergence of popular religion and the formation of the ethical subject from the practice of common morality located where autonomy collapses in the face of the transcendent. The presenter suggested that this line of reasoning can be applied to a discourse on rethinking the religious subject as subjugated to the transcendent. At the same time, Fujimoto pointed out that Yasumaru’s theory of common morality is an ideology derived from the male-dominated model of village leadership, and that its lack of a gender perspective should not be overlooked.

In response to Fujimoto’s presentation, Komatsu questioned the use of the terms “approved” and “tolerant” in reference to Konkōkyō’s approval of the LGBT Association and the fact that it is said to be a tolerant religion because it has many female missionaries and female church leaders. If we are to have mutual recognition as God’s children, it means that we should reconsider the validity of the term “approval” as a directive from above. Komatsu was also concerned that wording such as “the first religious organization to approve” could send a message that Konkōkyō differs from other religions. In this regard, Komatsu noted an essay by Sunagawa Hideki, a gay rights activist and cultural anthropologist, who wrote a review of the symposium “Buddhism and the SDGs II: Thinking from a LGBTQ Perspective” sponsored by the All Japan Buddhist Association and published in the 14 January 2021 issue of the *Buddhist Times*.

Sunagawa pointed out that LGBT and gender issues are adjacent, and that by taking up LGBT issues there is a danger of sending the message that matters of gender are no longer an issue.

While evaluating Fujimoto's point that a conversion through a call from God can lead one to change from a life based on secular moral values or see a possibility of transcending the gender system, Komatsu raised a couple of issues. First, in response to the argument that sexism arose out of an accommodation to secular values in missionary work rather than Konkōkyō's own values, Komatsu posed the questions of whether or not the founder, as a human being, was free from the influences of the world at the time, and if the fact that women have been asked to do the supporting labor has kept them from roles in the administration of the religious organization. Furthermore, Konkō Daijin exerted human efforts of conflict and compromise among various relationships. When these efforts are interpreted as the postmortem activities of the founder, Komatsu stated, the possibility that some people may fall outside the norms in the name of God is undeniable and the interpretation of the founder's words must be carefully reviewed in relation to gender norms.

Second, regarding the theory of interpellation and subjectivation, Komatsu stated that we should not overlook the question of how to discern whether or not the call from God is entangled with the bonds of power and community. Considering that originally the word "call" in Althusser's work meant "interrogation," we must also consider the dangers involved in forcing the self-awareness of evil people and entrusting them to what seems to be transcendence but is actually dependence and obedience. Komatsu emphasized that we must also look at whether we can make a clear distinction between the tendency to praise women who have chosen to do the supportive labor of the religious institution as the result of perceived gender norms within the faith community and turning to the call as a recognition of power.

Kawahashi concluded with some brief comments. She began by noting that the NIRC is a center for interreligious dialogue, and that in 2004 it hosted a lecture entitled "Gender and Interreligious Dialogue" by Ursula King, a leading feminist scholar of religion. King has consistently criticized the lack of feminist perspectives in interreligious dialogue, and in this sense, she pointed out that it is significant that the NIRC has hosted workshops on gender and religious studies for the past three years. She went on to state that it has been fifty years since the "liberation movement" and less than forty years since a similar movement began in the religious world in the mid-1980s. However, the so-called "Mori comments," which made headlines in the media and at academic conferences, were all too familiar to people in religious orders. There are so many memories

of hearing ranking male priests at Buddhist institutions say in their opening remarks at training sessions for women, “You need to know your place.”

Regarding the former Olympic Organizing Committee Chairman Mori Yoshiro’s comment about “women knowing their place,” Komatsu criticized those who have invested interests in maintaining the old value system, which is an attitude toward dismissing those who do not accord with the status quo. This sense of misogyny, which trivializes the problem as the fault of “noisy women,” is deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

In many aspects of society, misogyny and the backlash against gender equality are now on the rise, punishing women who challenge male-supremacy and glorifying submissive women. In this regard, we, the authors of this essay, are concerned that a distorted image of feminism is spreading across the field of religious studies. For example, a summary highlighting the reasons for awarding the 15th International Institute for the Study of Religion (IISR) Research Prize praises the awardee for discussing the subject of women in religion without taking an intransigent feminist perspective toward patriarchy or inequality. The term “intransigent feminism” is used to refer to the problem of power structures. The summary was later appended with a correction after Komatsu and Kawahashi raised concerns with the IISR ([www.iisr.jp/award/2019/folder/index.html](http://www.iisr.jp/award/2019/folder/index.html)). The tendency to approve of gender studies scholars who are “women who know their place” but exclude “women who do not know their place” is deeply problematic. The fear of allowing entry of people with different opinions into a homogenous and homosocial community is understandable, but the low percentage of women on the board of the IISR, which is composed of leading figures in religious studies and representatives of various religious orders, is disconcerting.

The Gender Equality Planning and Youth Support workgroups, whose members include Kawahashi, Kobayashi, Inose, and others involved in the study of religion and gender, were established at the Japan Association for the Study of Religions. Although the association has begun to work towards overcoming disparities based on gender by empowering such activities, it is clear that one reason for the slow progress on gender equality in religious studies is the patriarchal structures of the religious institutions upon which it was founded. In other words, the problem is the complicity of religious institutions and scholars.

## Future Endeavors

In conclusion, religion and gender studies is a group effort, the success of which is inconceivable without the networking of female scholars and female religious

leaders (as well as male scholars and religious leaders who are allies of gender issues). However, we are now in a situation where sporadic movements for gender equality are scattered throughout the world of religion. Recently, we can see such movements even among Buddhist institutions. The “Women’s Association for Thinking about Discrimination against Women in the Ōtani Branch of Shinshū,” for which Fujiba Yoshiko who presented at the GRRC workshop is a member, petitioned the religious organization to establish a committee for teaching and learning about sexual discrimination. A committee for the promotion of lateral SDGs that include a gender perspective was established in the Sōtōshū, for which Kawahashi was involved. The ratio of female members in the various committees of the All-Japan Buddhist Association has increased. The significance of the GRRC is that it can connect these movements within disparate organizations and spool them into a single trend.

Gender and religious studies are often said to be indifferent toward each other, but we are beginning to see an effort to cross the divide between these two academic fields. The *Encyclopedia of Gender*, scheduled to be published by Maruzen by next year, will include a section on “Religion and Faith” with approximately twenty entries (Komatsu and Kawahashi serve on the editorial board for this section). Such publications are a welcomed development and suggest that feminism and gender studies are reconsidering their indifference toward religion.

Sexual violence among clergy is a frequent occurrence, and it goes without saying that gender training is essential in the education of chaplains in order to prevent such events. I have heard that there are editors in religious-affiliated media who are prejudiced against gender issues, stating that they do not want to write about gender because it is annoying. A female journalist from the *Buddhist Times* wrote an excellent article about the workshop (*Buddhist Times*, 18 March). In the future, it is important for there to be more female journalists writing from a gender perspective in the religious media. We will continue to hold workshops to examine the diversity and commonality of gender in religion, and hope that it will gain the sympathy of many more people in both academia and among religious practitioners.