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Editors' Introduction

Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan

OUR IDEA for this special issue was that it would present, largely from the perspective of Japanese scholars, a view of movements in the study of religion and women in Japan that have taken place in the twenty years since the special *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (JJRS) issue on “Women and Religion in Japan” edited by Nakamura Kyōko. Although Nakamura passed away in 2001, her work still stands as a pioneering effort.¹ It was not until 1989 that *Shūkyō kenkyū* 宗教研究 [Journal of religious studies], published by the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, came out with its special issue *Shūkyō to josei* 宗教と女性.² The consciousness toward gender issues has undergone considerable change in Japanese society at large during the past two decades, and this has naturally influenced scholarship as well. The choice of the present title, “Feminism and Religion,” rather than “Women and Religion,” arises from our sense that the critical awareness that was embodied in the 1983 JJRS special issue should be given further development. In identifying women’s roles in Japanese religious history, pointing out the significance of their contribution, and noting that many scholars had done research on women in that connection, Nakamura was hinting that an introduction of feminist perspectives by women would make a difference to the field. She gave one instance of this in Yanagita Kunio, whose work emphasized the role of women but was nevertheless lacking

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1. JJRS 10 /2-3 (1983). Nakamura wrote the introduction to this issue as guest editor. The articles were by Takagi Kiyoko, Helen Hardacre, Uchino Kumiko, Kaneko Sachiko and Robert E. Morell, Takemi Momoko, and Igeta Midori.

2. *Shūkyō kenkyū* Vol. 68-1, No. 280. This issue contains contributions by Ōgoshi Aiko, Okano Haruko, and Igeta Midori, who had long affirmed the importance of feminist perspectives in Japanese religious studies.

in criticism of the social injustices that beset women (NAKAMURA 1983, pp. 119–20).³

Before turning to the main purpose of this issue, we would like to give an overview of the current state of feminist research in Japan. The woman's liberation (*ūman ribu*) movement, which developed into the second wave of Japanese feminism, originated in the early 1970s.⁴ The second wave subsequently gave rise to women's studies (*joseigaku*). Organizations such as the Women's Studies Association of Japan and the Women's Studies Society of Japan were founded, and journals and other publications on women's studies came into print.⁵ The National Women's Education Center, which was founded in 1977 as part of the United Nations Decade for Women program, initiated a series of women's studies lectures in 1980. According to surveys conducted by this National Women's Education Center, the number of women's studies-related courses being run at universities and junior colleges is steadily increasing. The introduction to the special *JJRS* issue of 1983 cited 84 universities and 112 courses. By 2000, these figures had risen to 609 universities and 2,456 courses (in subjects related to women's studies and gender theory). Moreover, some of the women's universities established women's studies research institutes starting in the 1980s. There are also graduate schools, though their number is still small, that grant degrees in women's studies.⁶ Growing numbers of section meetings and research reports on gender topics are taking place at the annual conferences of the existing learned societies.

The changes we see are not only quantitative. Women's studies has changed its name to gender studies and gone on to incorporate sexuality studies and men's studies, acquiring a certain stature in the process. Ueno Chizuko has described such changes as the institutionalization of women's studies, and has argued the importance of moving from discussion of its merits and demerits to

3. Concerning Yanagita and women, see KAWAHASHI forthcoming [a].

4. Vera MACKIE (2003) has dealt with the history of modern Japanese feminist thought and women's movements from 1870 to the present.

5. The Women's Studies Society of Japan, the first organization for women's studies research in this country, published the twenty-third issue of its *Annual Report of the Women's Studies Society of Japan* in the autumn of 2002. The complete run of this research journal, from the first issue in 1980 to the twenty-third in 2002, contains only seven articles or reports related to religion. Most of those are focused on feminist critiques of religion, and little to be found there has a perspective that encompasses the task of remaking as well as of criticism.

The situation has changed somewhat since the late 1990s, however, so that no comprehensive view of feminist and gender studies in Japan can omit religious studies (EHARA and KANAI 1997; AERA MOOK 2002; INOUE et al. 2002). These works all touch on religion, albeit in a partial manner. Religion in feminism (and feminism in religion) still occupies a marginal position, however, and remains an issue for the future.

6. Women's studies research institutes established at universities in the 1980s use the term "women's studies" in their names, but from the 1990s, growing numbers have been using "gender studies."

discussion of what is to be achieved within that institution (UENO 1999). The introduction to the *Joseigaku jiten* [Encyclopedia of women's studies], published in 2002, sums up the changes that have taken place in women's studies since the 1970s as the result "not of simple importation from European and American countries, but of a rooting in Japanese society that achieved the development from gender role studies to gender studies, and steadily accumulated a body of findings" (INOUE et al. 2002, p. i). This vision of gender studies rooted in Japanese society has much in common with our fundamental approach to editing this issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*.

Where feminist and gender studies in Japan have advanced in this way, religion, as though in inverse proportion, has been a less-than-frequent topic for Japanese feminist and gender studies. The tendency to see religion and feminism as mutually incompatible, and to view religious feminism as an oxymoron, has been taken up in the debate over whether Islamic feminism is possible.⁷ For many feminists, religion is a tool of patriarchy that is still used to oppress and exclude women, and to deny them the opportunity to make their own decisions.⁸ A similar resistance to gender concerns and feminism was felt more strongly in religion than in other fields, not only in Japan but in Europe and America. As JUSCHKA has summarized it, "The study of religion has been one of those disciplines resistant to feminist thought" (2001, p. 1). No doubt this tendency was even stronger in Japan, where, as noted above about Yanagita, scholars of religion frequently took up women's religious life as a topic, but introducing concepts of feminism or gender was seen as insinuating a particular political design into research. This was viewed, in other words, as an undesirable stance that lacked scholarly neutrality (NOMURA and KAWAHASHI 2001). In short, feminist studies have been viewed as existing in an awkward relationship with religious studies in Japan.⁹ Feminism, however, does not only

7. See, for example, MOGHADAM 2002.

8. One major feminist scholar who takes this view is Ōgoshi Aiko. See ŌGOSHI 1997.

9. This is not, of course, to say that Japanese religious studies have always silenced the woman's voice. In recent years, the International Institute for the Study of Religions (IISR: Kokusai Shūkyō Kenkyūjo 国際宗教研究所) has been a force for the advancement of religious and women's studies, and it is continuing to address this issue deliberately and enthusiastically. (Many of the contributors to this issue are IISR committee members.) The proceedings of the 1995 IISR symposium were published as *Josei to kyōdan: Nihon shūkyō no omote to ura* 日本宗教のオモテとウラ (KOKUSAI SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪJO, 1996) under the editorial supervision of Nomura and Usui, who are contributors to this volume. Three contributors in this current issue—USUI, KAWAHASHI, and KUROKI—were also among the panelists in a Religion and Gender workshop held by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society in 1997. The proceedings were published as a separate volume of *Shūkyō to shakai* 宗教と社会 in 1997. Contributors KANEKO and USUI were also involved in a forum on Women and Religion at the Tenri Yamato Culture Congress in 1998. A panel on Religion and Women was then held at the Japanese Association for Religious Studies in 1999 with the participation of Usui as well as KOMATSU, who is likewise a contributor to this issue. A summary is contained in *Shūkyō kenkyū* vol. 73–4, No. 323.

criticize religion. Feminist thought can influence women's religious practice itself, and transform it. The religious world in Japan has been informed by feminism in recent years, and movements to reform religious organizations are emerging, as shown by KAWAHASHI and YAMAGUCHI in this issue. Here we find commonalities with the feminist theology movements in Europe and America, where feminism is used for critical leverage to reform male-dominated Judeo-Christian religions.¹⁰ One purpose of this special issue is to introduce these movements by women to engage the task of reforming established religion by incorporating women's perspectives and experience.

We will briefly introduce the individual articles in this issue below. It should be understood, of course, that there are many important topics relating to women and religion in Japan other than those collected here. See KAWAHASHI (forthcoming [b]) for further exploration of some of these topics that supplement the present issue.¹¹

Feminist studies in Japan up to this time have almost all taken religion as an object for critique. A common thread through the seven articles collected here is that they do not conclude with criticism of the patriarchy in religion, but move beyond it to reinterpret and reconstruct religious traditions. The first article, by USUI, takes a critical approach to the new religions for their conventional view of women as troubled, which, she argues, rendered the religious experiences of those women invisible. Taking the case of women in Shinnyoen, she examines the possibilities presented by spirituality as an approach to resistance against the conservative gender structure found in this order. As Usui herself points out, however, the term "spirituality" itself is "constantly beset with dangers." The editors think that due caution should be taken to delimit the discussion of spirituality, and also to question whether spirituality and spiritual power are one and the same.¹²

KANEKO examines the family and gender views of Tenrikyō, identifying in them a "conservative tendency" that takes a dim view of gender equality and presupposes a greater difference between sexes than between individuals. She goes beyond that, however, by means of woman-follower narratives, to argue that Tenrikyō has a foster parent program that is not bound by the strictures of the modern family system. This is a program that takes in people who for various reasons have not fit into the image of the modern family and accepts them into the "church family" (*kyōkai kazoku*). Kaneko traces the underlying basis of the program to a way of life shaped by the family sufferings of the founder, Nakayama Miki, and the founder's daughter, Kokan, whose role had a shaman-

10. See, for example, PLASKOW and CHRIST 1989.

11. In Japanese, KAWAHASHI and KUROKI (forthcoming) discusses religion and feminism, together with various theoretical issues.

12. English-language studies of Shinnyoen include HUBBARD 1998.

istic aspect. Although the church family “transcends the framework of blood relationships,” however, the same characteristics of gender-based role assignments found in the modern family can be discerned in it. Therefore the question of how this is to lead to empowerment of the women followers who perform services for this system, and of the people who are helped by them, remains as an issue that must be clarified by listening to those women’s voices.

The “old tale” of *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養 is a still-current practice that has aspects of intimidation and gender discrimination. Through this practice religion is not, KOMATSU argues, providing women who suffer from their abortion experiences with answers to questions about the meaning of abortion or about the beginning and ending of life. Komatsu presents the voices of women who do not judge whether the act of abortion itself is good or evil, but rather seek a positive way to live with it by adopting an affirmative sense of life that is founded in a worldly, New Age view of transmigration and rebirth. In that view, a living being in this world is no more than one configuration of a spiritual entity that exists in the continuum of past, present, and future. Consequently, abortion is an act decided within the human relationship enfolding the fetus and the pregnant woman, and it takes its meaning within that person’s life accordingly. In looking to this New Age view of life for possible answers that traditional religion is unable to provide, the author presents a fresh perspective.¹³

The articles by Usui, Kaneko, and Komatsu can be seen as challenges to the once-common construction of women involved in new religions and *mizuko kuyō* as unstable and lacking in subjecthood. Usui has intended to go beyond the research done by Igeta Midori, who focused on denouncing the gender discrimination in Japanese traditional religions, but she also points out that Igeta at the same time follows the work done by Helen Hardacre. Kaneko has likewise given a critical reading of Hardacre’s interpretation of Tenrikyō texts. It is to be hoped that we will see the dialogue between Japanese and overseas scholars enhanced by further serious response to each other’s research.

The articles by MORI, KAWAHASHI, and YAMAGUCHI describe the efforts of women to remake traditional religion by directing the critical perspective of feminism on Buddhism or Christianity. Mori and Kawahashi have both been members since the founding of a network for Buddhist women that crosses sectarian boundaries, and their articles are complementary.¹⁴

Mori’s article shows how Nichiren’s teachings regarding women have been distorted by male priests into a doctrine that degrades women who live by faith

13. For a variety of interpretations of *mizuko kuyō* in Japan, see the special issue of the *Journal of the AAR*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1999).

14. This network published JOSEI TO BUKKYŌ TŌKAI-KANTŌ NETTOWĀKU 1999, and a sequel volume is scheduled to be issued in 2004.

in the *Lotus Sutra*. She finds that when women reread Nichiren in light of their own experiences as women, they suggest possibilities for transforming the discriminatory condition of the Buddhist community. Mori explains this as the action of women who had previously devoted themselves entirely to listening to the teachings but now relate to Buddhism as actors in their own right who inquire into their own ways of life. Kawahashi works through a comparison of a Zen school that professes priestly renunciation of secular married life (*shukke shugi*), and the Shin school, which proclaims a lay approach (*zaikai shugi*), to show that while each side takes a different view of clerical marriage, there are commonalities in the gender equality problems encountered in both orders. Therefore these women of the Buddhist community—who had conventionally been represented as though they were either upholders of the status quo who lacked any critical sense, or powerless victims—formed their network, and Kawahashi describes their words and actions as they seek to reform the Buddhist community. This also serves as an antithesis to the claim made by some women scholars of Buddhism in Europe and America that a feminist Buddhism is only possible in the West. A parallel to this reform movement in the Buddhist community can be found in the new movement of Christian women in Japan described by Yamaguchi. Feminist theology in Europe and America has worked to overcome patriarchy in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, stimulating similar movements in Japan as well. Christian women, who are a vastly outnumbered minority in Japan, have sought to create a theology and community rooted in their own life experience, differing from those that were created from the perspective of the West, and particularly of a white male elite. For this purpose they established the Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan (CFTMJ). The CFTMJ stance emphasizes the following three points: concerns rooted in life experience, connecting theological studies and church activities, and discrimination against women as one of the various forms of discrimination that exist within a patriarchal social structure. Yamaguchi, building on this, offers a reinterpretation of the story of Martha, and argues for the possibility of a multimodal divine metaphor.¹⁵

WACKER's article takes a different tack from the others on these subjects. She focuses primarily on *onarigami* オナリ神 belief to trace how gender meanings have been assigned to women historically in traditional Okinawan religion, and to show that this belief also affects the identities of women in Okinawa today. Wacker typifies the high quality of traditional Japanese and Ryūkyūan studies

15. For trends in feminism and Christianity in Japan, see *Kyōkai to josei* 教会と女性 Nos. 1–15 (1987–2001), published by the Subcommittee on Women's Problems, Kanagawa Diocese Women's Committee, United Church of Christ in Japan, and *Womanspirit* Nos. 1–34 (final issue in 2002), published by the *Feminizumu, shūkyō, heiwa no kai* フェミニズム・宗教・平和の会 [Feminism, religion, and peace group].

in Europe, and she has warned against research on Okinawan religion and women that, done hastily and with inadequate documentation and fieldwork, has been the object of recent attention.

This Nakamura Kyōko memorial issue closes with an obituary written by NOMURA Fumiko, who was the late scholar's colleague. A detailed account of Nakamura's accomplishments can be found in the inaugural issue of the Kawamura Gakuen Women's University *Joseigaku nenpō* 川村学園女子大学女性学年報 (2003). We regret that we were unable to incorporate women's voices regarding the Shinto community in this special issue, and wish to direct the reader to the International Institute for the Study of Religions (*Kokusai shūkyō kenkyūjo* 国際宗教研究所) symposium proceedings that contain a valuable suggestion by a woman Shinto priest concerning gender issues in the Shinto community.¹⁶

We hope to see the continuing accumulation of research that, while based on thoroughgoing fieldwork, also deals at the same time both with movements by women in religion to reform religious communities and with the influences on Japanese society from religions that have been changed by feminism.

Finally, our stance in editing this special issue is consonant with the stance of those feminist scholars of religion who are of non-Western ethnic and racial backgrounds and who have been claiming a presence in the religious communities of Europe and America in recent years.¹⁷ It has already been observed that religious studies is largely innocent of a critical examination of the "Eurocentric mindset" and unaware of its habit of reducing other religious traditions to fit into Western categories (Joy 2001, p. 177). The rise of non-Western feminism in recent years shows that we now must think in terms of plural feminisms. Therefore, although the title of this issue has feminism in the singular, we take the view that it should be discussed in the plural. This issue in part represents a challenge to the understanding in much of the research carried out up to this point, in Japan as well as in Europe and America, of non-Western women's religious experience as no more than a casualty of the patriarchy, or a strategy of the weak. When women not of the West affirm the self-representations of such women, the scholars of religion in Europe and America must reexamine the appropriateness of the woman's experience that they as Westerners consider universal. That is to say, researchers of Japanese women and religions will be called on to be reflexively aware and critical of whether their own interpretations are imposing a Western—or some other—agenda on the subject. At the same time that the situatedness of Japanese women is taken into account, the situatedness of European and American researchers must also be taken into account. We might add that it is not our purpose with this special issue to assert

16. See KOKUSAI SHŪKYŌ KENKYŪJO 1996, pp. 69–77.

17. See, for example, DONALDSON and KWOK 2002.

the superiority of Japanese researchers over those in Europe and America.¹⁸ As shown in *Engendering Faith*, a compendium of extensive research on Buddhism and women edited by Barbara RUCH (2002), it has become common in recent years for researchers from various parts of the world as well as Europe and America to work in collaboration with Japanese researchers. No doubt this collaboration will surpass the unequal partnership frequently found in past area studies, with its unfortunate division of roles in which the researcher on the Japanese side provides data as a native informant, and the Western researcher uses theory to analyze the data.

In conclusion, we would like to explain our hopes for this issue. The *Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion (JFSR)*, published by the American Association of Religion, is a groundbreaking journal of work in religion and feminism. It is our hope that this special issue will serve as the occasion to initiate, at some point in the future, a Japanese journal similar to the JFSR. We expect that will require us not only to improve the quality of researchers and raise the level of work in the fields concerned, but also to carry out institutional reform of religious studies in Japan.¹⁹

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18. Recent excellent work on religion and women in Japan includes, for example, ARAI 1999 and SMYERS 1999, among others. As a theoretical study of gender and Buddhism in particular, FAURE 2003 was extremely stimulating. We can also look forward to the long-awaited publication of important long-term research on *mizuko kuyō* by Elizabeth G. Harrison.

19. The valuable research done by Fujiwara Satoko of Taisho University indicates that the number of classes in religious studies taught by women faculty members has been on the decline over the past decade. It is no longer unusual to find women heading learned societies in the neighboring field of anthropology, but for religion this still appears to be a distant dream.

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