

Women and Religion in Japan: Introductory Remarks

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IT WAS in the mid-seventies that the so-called women's studies was first brought to light in Japan. Evidently it was transported from the United States, where women's studies had developed in close cooperation with the contemporary women's liberation movement. In Japan women's studies as such has been given its citizenship in but few co-educational colleges, but it is accommodated in some liberal women's colleges or adult education programs for women. This does not mean the perspective of women's studies is rarely found on the college campus. Rather, courses have been offered or papers written with feminist overtones in traditional disciplines in recent years.¹

Women's studies, as we understand it today, is primarily based on the realization of sexism in history and oriented toward women's liberation. To put it another way, women's studies aims at transcending the category of women through the study of women. It is the disciplined study of women in the natural, social, or human sciences from the viewpoint of women. Women's studies thus launched in Japan brought into existence a few groups of researchers with common concerns in the late seventies,

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1. According to a report on the recent research made by the Kokuritsu Fujin Kyōiku Kaikan (National Women's Education Center), women's studies has found its way into college curriculum increasingly since 1979, and such courses, either under a proper title or in disguise, amounted to a total of 112 in 84 colleges. The center itself offers courses on women's studies and draws women in all walks of life. For further information, see *Fujin Kyōiku Jōhō* (Bulletin of the National Women's Education Center) No. 8, 14 September 1983. See also "Joseigaku kōza shiryō" ("Materials for women's studies"), a mimeographed bulletin published by the Kokuritsu Fujin Kyōiku Kaikan in 1983.

but their members amount only to several hundred altogether (*Fujin kyōiku jōhō*, No.8, 1983). In opposition stand those who doubt the autonomy of women's studies as a discipline, or those who believe that charges of sexism are misplaced, since it is the natural consequence of role playing between sexes based on biological differences.

These phenomena may be understood better if the following facts are kept in mind. First, Japanese society as a whole remains conservative, taking role playing between sexes for granted as the basis of the modern economic structure. Many women are satisfied with increasing personal freedom and an income sufficient to fulfill individual needs within their families and society. Second, women remain a minority in professional fields, discriminated against in getting jobs and hindered from pursuing careers in spite of legal equal rights and a rapid increase of female college graduates and working housewives. Third, there are unbridged gaps between professionals and so-called feminist workers, who have tended to be split rather than united.

The general situation of women's studies is even worse in the field of women and religion. We must, first of all, admit that woman researchers, who make up a negligible minority in this area, have never been organized and have barely survived as professionals. Sexism as a social reality has made it hard for them to make remarkable contributions in fields where chances are limited for them to get jobs or do research, and they suffer from the conflict between their professional careers and the traditional home-centered way of life which is expected of them. We are still a long way from the Western situation, where religious studies and other disciplines have produced numerous works on women over the past decade or so.

In spite of such adversity the impetus of women's studies has given new perspectives mainly to female researchers, as a reading of the essays presented in this volume will show. To my mind, the study of religions and women's studies have some characteristics in common. There is an agreement as to the object of study, namely,

religion or women. The two are originally interdisciplinary and cannot be value free. They require researchers to discipline themselves without loss of their existential commitments. There is no general consensus as to methods, however, and various methods from established disciplines have been applied according to specific needs. This volume consequently contains a variety of methods: historical, psychological, hermeneutical, and others.

In the first essay of this volume, TAKAGI Kiyoko provides a biographical study of Higuchi Ichiyō, one of Japan's eminent modern writers. This is a case study of the religious life of a young intelligent woman in the Meiji Era. Takagi regards Ichiyō's habitual religious practices as a way of life or routine of her time. Her intellectual understanding of Buddhism or Christianity never found its way into her personal experience: her real goal in life was creative writing and nothing else. This may be a typical example of a modern agnostic Japanese.

Helen HARDACRE concludes in her essay on the ritual ascent of Mt. Ōmine that the meaning of ritual must be explained differently depending on the gender of the participants. The central motif of this rite is interpreted as *coincidentia oppositorum* for men, but for women it is a return to the source as a vehicle for completing their own being. She aptly proposes to find the proper language to articulate differences in the religious experiences of women and men. Such language will have to be suitable for describing the particulars of female experiences but also will have to be linked to methodological issues in general terms.

UCHINO Kumiko, the compiler of the first bibliography for the study of women in Japan (Uchino 1981), delineates the slow but steady process of elevating the status of nuns in the Sōtō Zen Sect since the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Education was a key to the awakening of nuns. In the Sōtō Sect the increase of educated nuns, aware of discrimination, led first to an equality movement and then to an

unexpected antagonism between the celibate nuns and the wives of monks. This antagonism originated in the double standard of allowing monks to marry while still insisting on the celibacy of the nuns. No wonder fewer and fewer women renounce secular life for faith and celibacy when pluralistic lifestyles are available to them. The nuns' status seems to be determined by the general social status of women rather than by any doctrinal basis.

KANEKO Sachiko and Robert E. MORRELL depict the history of Tōkeiji, a Zen temple at Kamakura which served as a sanctuary for unhappy women ranging from princesses to commoners—including prostitutes—crushed under the force of feudal society. Tōkeiji was founded in 1285 and remained a convent for six centuries, until it was turned into a branch temple of Engakuji of the Rinzai Zen Sect as a result of the Meiji government's centralization policy. A glance at the list of its abbesses will explain why this convent was able to maintain its privileges against secular authorities during the feudal ages. Many of them were the widows and daughters of the heads of the Kamakura and Tokugawa governments. This convent later became known as the "divorce temple," an asylum for abused wives, as family institutions were made rigid and government depended on male-oriented Neo-Confucianism during the Tokugawa period (1615-1867). Although some formalities were needed, this convent was a unique institution in the eastern part of Japan in its role of forcing despotic husbands to divorce their ill-treated wives. It is a pity that this kind of asylum is still needed for women for various reasons, even though women have now been made legally equal.

TAKEMI Momoko uses a solid textual study to successfully date the first transmission of a Buddhist sutra on menstruation and blood pollution from China which she places in the mid-Muromachi period, or the fifteenth century. Then she uses the extant documents to analyze the beliefs and cults concerning this sutra. From her we learn how monks and other religionists exploited women for centuries by preaching on their destiny to be condemned to

Blood Pool Hell, then using this sutra to save them from such destiny. These beliefs and cults have already declined as the view of woman as impure and sinful has diminished, but the sutra might be used in a different context, and a new hermeneutics of this sutra is certainly needed. On the contemporary scene another exploitation of women has been made of those who suffer from the sense of guilt following an abortion (see Brooks 1981). We find similar structures in these phenomena; religionists make profits from such cults, which spread rapidly within a few years.

It is often said that the Japanese common psychic attitude is defined by the archetypal images of the Great Mother and Eternal Boy. IGETA Midori challenges this popular theory by proposing another archetype, that of Unari, the sister protecting her brother, that is, her kin. The cult of Unari has survived in the Okinawa cultural circle and seems to have once existed on mainland Japan as well. This archetype has died out, probably because of the conflict with the *ie*, the patrilineal family institution of feudal and modern times, in which women are deferred to only as mothers, with childless wives being divorced.

IT IS true that some pioneers have revealed penetrating insights into the area of women and religion before our time. The contributions of women have been too significant to be ignored in the Japanese history of religion, and hence many researchers have studied women as well as men. Are we, then, really in need of women's studies? Is there any difference between the previous works, mostly conducted by men, and recent works with feminist perspectives?

I hope the essays in this issue will convince the reader of this need, but would also like to call attention to one unequalled pioneer, Yangita Kunio (1875-1962). He founded the study of the folk tradition in this country which has been transmitted by common people, half of whom are, needless to say, women. Thus he shifted the focus of his research from androcentric disciplines to androgenous, domestic ones. Not only did he evaluate women as transmit-

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ters of folk culture but commended them as field workers, who, he said, could understand others better than men (Yanagita 1932).

Although we are greatly indebted to his penetrating remarks and accumulated documents on traditional rituals and beliefs, we are disappointed to detect in his works the male-dominant social institution and role playing of sexes taken for granted and silence on women's sufferings. We find in Yanagita no viewpoints of social criticism, but rather strong nostalgic longings for the good old days, which were built on the sacrifice of women.

Nevertheless, we cherish the tradition in which the study of women has been carried out not only by women but some men. It is far from our desire to fall to exclusivism by insisting on female initiatives in this area. But obviously female researchers are more conscious of women's problems and more committed to their solutions than their male counterparts. The fact that all the contributors to this volume except one are women is the result of this social reality, and not the result of any principle of selection. We should like to welcome more men to join the venture and develop friendly but critical dialogues.

Last but not least, my hearty thanks go to the devotional assistance of Professors Jan Swyngedouw and W. Michael Kelsey. Without their encouragement and invaluable service we could not have been able to bring out this special issue. We sincerely hope this kind of cooperative work will be promoted further in the field of women and religion.

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