RE-IMAGINING BUDDHIST WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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Gender is without doubt one of the most critical issues of our time, but the field of religious studies has remained relatively unaffected by the so-called ‘critical turn’ of gender. And yet, as Ursula King has argued repeatedly, “it is no longer possible to accurately describe, analyze or explain any religion” without recourse to the category of gender (King and Beattie 2004: 8). King emphasizes, moreover, that gender is not a synonym for women. Rather, gender studies must concern men as well as women, for studying gender involves questions of “their respective identities, representations, individual subjectivities, as well as their mutually interrelated social worlds and the unequal power relations between them” (King 2005: 5:3296).

Japanese feminist and gender studies have typically shown little enthusiasm for religion as a topic of study. There is a tendency to see religion and feminism as mutually incompatible, and to view religious feminism as an oxymoron.¹ Many feminists consider religion to be a tool of patriarchy that is still being used to oppress and exclude women, and to deny them the opportunity to make their own decisions (Ōgoshi 1997). A similar resistance to gender concerns and feminism has been felt more strongly in religion than in other fields, not only in Japan but in Europe and America. As Darlene Juschka (2001: 1) summarized it, “[t]he study of religion has been one of those disciplines resistant to feminist thought.” This tendency has been even stronger in Japan, where scholars of religion frequently take the religious life of women as a topic, but consider the introduction of feminism or gender concepts as insinuating a particular political design into research. Such concerns are widely viewed, therefore, as undesirable signs of a stance that lacks scholarly neutrality. In short, feminist studies have been viewed as existing in an awkward relationship with religious studies in Japan.²

¹ This has been taken up, for example, in the debate over whether Islamic feminism is possible (e.g., Moghadam 2002).
² This is not to say, of course, that Japanese religious studies have always silenced the woman’s voice. In recent years, the International Institute for the Study of Religions (IISR) has been a force for the advancement of religious and women’s studies, and it is continuing to address this issue deliberately and enthusiastically. Also see the Journal of
During a recent academic conference in fields related to religion and sociology, one panel was supposed to reexamine gender equality and the public character of Buddhist communities. A male anthropologist of religion who frequently appears in the mass media commented that feminism was something that only had to do with intelligent people, and so the ordinary women he knew found it too difficult to understand. He presented this comment as if he were close to socially disenfranchised women, and as if to state that the theories of feminism and gender are actually so abstruse that they are far removed from the realities of ordinary women, belonging rather to the province of researchers and other similarly privileged women. Beneath its superficial seeming of sympathy, however, the comment was a sophisticated maneuver in the service of an anti-feminist agenda.

Later, we learned that a number of male scholars of religion who were at the conference had expressed approval of the comment. Many of them are senior scholars of considerable achievement and position. They have apparently concluded that the feminist and gender perspectives are inconsequential for religious studies because the common person is unable to understand them. To the contrary, feminist thought can influence and even transform women’s religious practice by making the religious institutions less patriarchal and thus giving women greater chances to participate in them. The religious world in Japan has begun to be informed by feminism in recent years, and movements to reform religious organizations are emerging. 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 (e.g., Plaskow and Christ 1989). One purpose of this chapter is to introduce some of these movements by women in Japan who are engaging the task of reforming established religion by incorporating women’s perspectives and experience.

Religion and Social Movements

If feminist movements in the religious world have any feature that differentiates them from social movements in general, it is that they are

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