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**The Distressing Relationship between  
Religion and Feminism Studies in Japan:  
How Can We Carry on Feminist Research?**

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This report is based on “ Introduction ” by N. Kawahashi in *The Science of Religion from a Gender Perspective* by N. Kawahashi and Makazu Tanaka (Its chapter on “ Christianity ” is by Satoko Yamaguchi).

Almost all studies concerning religion from a gender or feminist perspective have taken the view that “ the patriarchy in religion is a tool to dominate women ” because they have emphasized the phase of sexual discrimination within religion. In other words, the male-centered ideas and systems that subsist in religion have caused the oppression of women. Moreover, almost all religions tend to strengthen and defend the weight of the difference between women and men under their dogmas and God ’ s name. Therefore, one tends to deny that gender is variable and formed social-culturally, and takes the view that it is the invariable nature of both women and men. This view stimulates criticism that religion contributes to the discrepancy of power ’ s relationship between women and men through securing the difference. Therefore, one takes a view that to integrate the studies in religion with gender studies is essentially limited (See Kawahashi, 2004, 111).

However, the relationship between the two studies brings up a more complicated problem. Not only have most gender studies been critical and regardless of religion, but also studies in religion have displayed strong opposition to gender studies. Ursula King, one of the most noted researchers on religion and gender in Europe, using the word “ double-blindness ” about the distressing relationship between religion and gender, explains: Most gender studies remain extraordinarily religion-blind and unconcerned in all of their terrain. Equally, most studies in religion continue to be gender-blind and regardless of its significance (King, 2004, 1-2). In the latter, the gender perspective has been trivialized within the studies of religion and is deeply concerned with the problems of “ objectivity ” and “ neutrality. ” In other words, an approach from a gender perspective has been misunderstood as “ a reductionistic study ” that is one-sided. A gender perspective is seen as partly ideologically biased, with the view that religion has its supremacy and universality over each culture and history in the world and sex (Komatsu, 2005, 47). This is one of

the causes of strengthening opposition to gender.

The approach to religious studies of Mircea Eliade, one of twentieth century 's historians of religion, is based on the idea of " homo religiosus ( religious person ) . " However, this person ' s religious experience was actually represented by the male. To this point, the male ' s spirituality was seen as a universality that has objectivity. (Recently, women ' s religious studies scholars have criticized Eliade ' s religious studies for their lack of a gender perspective. See Hawthorne, 2005, 3025, and Kawahashi, 2007).

This tendency is more notable in Japan. Many religious studies in Japan are demonstrative and descriptive one about women ' s religious life, but religious studies that stress a gender perspective tend to be regarded as one that does not consider the objectivity or the neutrality of the studies. The gender perspective has also been regarded as a secondary issue that follows " orthodox religious studies " and as an emotional one that often involves political propaganda. Generally speaking, the position of women ' s scholars is marginalized, and the number of them assigned to administrative positions within the Japanese Association for Religious Studies is fewer than in other associations. In addition, women ' s scholars who have a gender perspective are in an even more trivialized situation. Some scholars are seen as those who dare to announce, " I don ' t know gender and like to seem to be a scholar who studies gender. " Above all, the problem is that there are male professors who do not recommend gender studies to women ' s students. This topic is argued in talks between Kawahashi and Fumiko Nomura, ' Modern Religion and Women, ' in " Modern Religion 2001. "

Thus, I think the myth of " objectivity " is behind the misunderstanding that gender studies in religious studies are one-sided and partial. This means the rule that the studies that have objectivity and neutrality are just to be described as one in the outside who keeps the distance between oneself as a scholar and others ' religion as the object of study. In the world of Japanese religious studies, when they adopt a gender approach, women ' s scholars may be seen with a one-sided view and as those who cannot objectively describe women ' s life as the subject of their research at an appropriate distance, taking a neutral viewpoint. This would compel an awareness of the gender problem to be marginalized.

Moreover, we cannot overlook the issue of ethics and politics generated when women ' s scholars express the idea of " feminist " research and describe the conviction in other women believers. It is possible for women ' s scholars to assume excessive identity and closeness in that they share the same gender within a religious society that participates in the movement. This is a myth that prevents intervention and exploitation from the outside, generated in the process of research, and an inequitable power relationship generated by the differences in the situations between two. I think that this must be " an act of breach of trust in double meaning. " This problem has been argued in detail on Chapter Two of *Intermingling Grace: Religion and Feminism in the Post-Colonial Period* ( by Masako Kuroki and N. Kawahashi, Jinbunshoin, 2004). This presentation does not give the women ' s

Buddhist movement special treatment because I think that I want you to read books, many of which are told through women ' s own experiences.

Finally, U. King insists that you could not exactly describe, analyze, and explain any religion until you apply a keen gender perspective (King, 2004, 8). And C. Ueno, a recognized authority on gender theory, points out that “ Now we could not have analyzed the subject of our research only from a gender perspective in all fields but without a gender perspective ” (Ueno, 2002, 31). “ Gender ” cannot be a value-neutral idea. In brief, it is a critical idea generating the power of a lever to demonstrate discrimination and power structure against sexuality and bring about social changes.

If gender unveils asymmetry regarding sexual distinction in the society, a lack of a gender perspective does not make sense in the studies of religion in the cause of human equal dignity and freedom. As U. King argues, the problems of gender are distributed within religion because they are complex, and the studies in both religion and gender are fascinating to us (King, 2004. 8). In “ Religious Studies from a Gender Perspective, ” I examine the possibility of new religious studies in the relationship between sacred writings and gender ' s rule, a new understanding from a gender perspective against an old one, the system and organization of the male chauvinism, today ' s reformation movement, and the problems that have been invisible but are visible by illuminating the relationship between modern society and religion from a gender perspective and others. The anthology with the prefix “ gender ” has already existed in adjacent fields such as cultural anthropology and sociology, but we can hardly find it in the field of religious studies. Therefore, this book contains many challenging works and their possibilities. In recent years, it has become possible to see backlash against the achievement of that gender equality and for the continuance of traditional sexual roles, and gender bashing through the rising tide of a conservative shift in various fields.

This trend is argued in detail in the book edited by Midori Wakakuwa and others. The trend of backlash in the religious society seems to begin to have influence in the center of a part of new religious organizations and Shinto bodies. We find the surprising fact that many scholars of both men and women are welcomed from academic associations where men ' s scholars, pretending to support women as the weak, on the politically anti-feminism ' s agendas, remark, namely “ the theory of feminism and gender obtains only for women with the privilege of scholars, making a big gap between them and laywomen because it is too deep for laywomen. ” Accordingly, it is important to develop religious studies from a gender perspective for not only scholars limited and enclosed by having the special concern for the studies and the problem particular to women but also the students of younger women and men highly motivated by the developing studies. I am concerned that the viewpoint of gender will end with one that should be reduced for us and studies in religion plunged into the stockades of the male chauvinism as long as we continue to believe it is rigidly incompatible with religious studies.

About women ' s reformation movement that aims for women ' s gender equality within Buddhist

bodies, the movement in which I am practically involved, see “ In the Cause on Buddhism with Gender Equality: A Sequel to Women ’ s Nyoze gamon (thus I hear quote from the sutras) (2004). ” And refer to my paper printed on a journal Zenbutsu, issued by Japan Buddhist Federation.

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There is a Japanese history in which patriarchal society interacted with religion, and then the patriarchal way of religion was authorized. Accordingly, N. Kawahashi grasps the situation that the studies from a feminist perspective are alienated within religion and the association for religious studies. Moreover, I think, she has tried to carry on the study of both religion and feminism on her own without avoiding questioning introspectively if she is a person who identifies herself with a researcher on religious studies, facing up to the fact that she is in a chief priest ’ s family at a Soto Zen Buddhist temple, Reiganji. Concerning this, her study ’ s posture is expressed: she faces a difficult challenge of how we can demonstrate and reform discrimination and power structure within religion in the constructive and feasible way, and dare to tackle this challenge from a gender perspective. I think this posture is greatly reflected in this presentation of hers that impressed me and attracted my attention significantly.

There have been several myths present in the history of religion. According to Kawahashi ’ s presentation, I think, firstly, there is a myth of the invariable relationship between men and women. I

agree with her viewpoint that this myth has caused strong sexual discrimination in patriarchy.

Second, there is a myth that the neutrality of value stands up in truth. Through this myth, the value in studies has been decided under the objective rule of value neutrality.

Third, there is a myth that religious experience is represented by men's. I think that N. Kawahashi demonstrates the distorted history of religion that has not been addressed as a problem.

Fourth, there is a myth that the method of gender studies/feminist theology that covers the differences among individuals and diversity in experience should be contrary to the rule present in studies that should be objective and neutral. We should examine her analysis and insight that this myth arouses enormous problems concerning the ethics and politics of scholars of the gender studies.

There is a similarity between these myths and our feminist Christians'. I think it is very important to have the method and viewpoint of study to get rid of these myths.

In addition to this problem, N. Kawahashi fleshes out other problems. First, she points out an ethical problem of whether women's scholars (or those in practice) can be the voice of women seen as many "others." I think the problem warns us of delusion that the scholars can share gender problems (racial, ethnic, class, sexual, educational, economic, religious and other) with women discriminated and alienated by different reasons and forms, using the similarity in "because of women." And it is essential to gender studies to realize those women/men discriminated and alienated by different forms exist. However, it actually seems not to do so. The problems rise: how can we develop the sensibility of this realization and tell it in teaching, and how can men/women play their parts actively on the way to change, who grow up without having the experience of realizing "others" ?

Nevertheless, on one hand, she grasps that the following is effective: women intentionally change the patriarchal relationship of domination and subjection between women and men by the integration into "women" (or "others") who dare to risk disguising the exploitation by and for women (Intermingling Grace, 42). Additionally, she grasps the binomial opposition of the relationship of gender between men and women which is actually impossible. Between these views, she proposes seeking concretely the way to awaken mutually to and participate actively in the views that are exclusive at first sight.

I think we can understand it better if she give us the explanation of the case in point: Does she think of every one of her views as effective in work with keeping the balance of two ideas, which, at first sight, are mutually exclusive? There is the serious problem that the difference among women creates those who are vanished by not diversifying a way of life as "women." Concerning this problem, what challenge do we face?

In relation to this problem, she addresses the following: "Gender is a critical idea to produce the power of social change' lever and to demonstrate discrimination and power structure relating to sexuality" ("The Unhappy Relationship between Religion and Feminism Studies in Japan," 5). I strongly sympathize with this remark of hers. I think it is very important to participate in the movement to aim for change within religion, as "others," which holds patriarchal distortion as living (involving writing and acting) from a feminist perspective as "to challenge the power structure concerning about

human being ' s life. ” This remark is addressed at another presentation (Intermingling Grace, 56). This might be because we understand instinctively its participation within religion that involves the way to live as the unvarnished human beings. But there is a sense of crisis in today ' s growing backlash that distorts this challenge politically. I asked N. Kawahashi what measures or discussions she organizes concretely in order to stand against this backlash and accomplish change.

We can see her point more clearly through the development of her argument. 1) She appreciates her identity that she is put into the existence oppressed as “ others. ” 2) However, she is aware of diversity which makes us impossible to integrate the existence seen as “ others ” in one category 3) Nevertheless, she appreciates clearly that this difference of gender is derived from the power structure and recognizes that on the basis of its appreciation we need to try to build measures and conversations to change the power structure little by little.

Through 1), I seem to be close to infinitely zero in a sense of distance between us and the existence as “ others. ” But through 2), we should be aware of a sense of distance with “ others ” who are expanded with any form and true life. 3) Nevertheless, we are unavoidably required to build dialogues to represent the voices that the existence has lost.

We could speak of the way, probably we can adopt only, the solidarity and suffering together with those who are excluded and hidden in the situation growing tense. I think it is effective only if we recognize the power we have in order to change the lost voices into “ the state having voices. ”

She explains what she calls “ hesitant sense ” ( Intermingling Grace, 63) . While she bears contradiction, difference and similarity lurking in the relationship when she herself as “ others ” relates to diverse “ others, ” she presents the posture to “ we respond the eyes of “ others. . . and relook critically the situation of self-dependence ” (Intermingling Grace, 63) . I think appearances differ whether we realize we cannot put us to a complete horizontal situation if we face completely and sincerely with “ others. ” But I find myself writhing in that I cannot do so actually. Although I speculate on the “ hesitant sense ” that she uses with sentiment like my one, I am grateful if she gives me a more particular account of the “ hesitant sense. ” That is because I seem to experience a difficulty with keeping it in our daily life if we understand it deeply, a sense that we should have.

I could sympathize sufficiently with and learned from N. Kawahashi ' s posture that can have ethical and political power. I appreciate her awakening us to the problems. I hope to work together with N. Kawahashi from now on, tackling the same problems in the cause. Thank you very much.



To H. Kuniyama ' s response that is sympathetic and pointedly essential, I think that I would respond if

we could have an adequate dialogue, but I will try to sum up my points briefly. Concerning the question how we can become aware of the existence of “ others ” despite the fact that we have lived without noticing such existence, I think that is something we might call “ En(chance/fate) ” which awakens us as being unconsciously on the side of the oppressing. For me, this problem has to do with my cultural background. I have faced the experience that my existence was always branded as “ Oriental women ” and orientalized within the white supremacy ’ s society in the West when I was in my teens.

I faced a big opportunity that influenced my future study, a primal experience: self is easily assumed by more powerful existence, and if its image is completely different from my mind, the voice of its protest is easily rejected (See my paper, “ ’ Japanese women ’ as ‘ others ’ ” in “ Studies in Folklore, ” 63-3, 2003). Through this experience, I have been challenged with self-awareness, realizing that others re-cast an eye at me without being content that I cast an eye at others, and what is more, it been a question where I always stand and whom I talk to.

In addition, this challenge bonds with the risk of the political ethic of research, what is called “ the phenomenon of representation, ” and of our representing others. For example, I speculate that religious studies in Japan were too tolerant and unaware of the representation ’ s phenomenon of religious experience that women living at the lower levels of society face, brought by the supremacy of men ’ s elite in the studies.

H. Kinukawa points out the difficulty and the hesitance to change “ the lost voices into the state having voices. ” We are careful for the sake of our understanding the pain and mortification brought by others who represent self distortedly. Therefore, I have expressed my view continuously that I am not the voice of women in the Buddhist society. All the others are not the only voice as well as I, and are not represented by all the others. I wrote in *Intermingling Grace* that my viewpoint is as “ a person partly concerned ” and my experience is “ sisterhood with reservation. ” I cannot justify or validate my study on the basis that I am a woman. If so, male scholars can make feminist religious studies fully from a proper perspective and viewpoint. If we face backlash in the future, growing our men ’ s “ comrade ” is essential within academic and religious societies. However, I think that H. Kinukawa and S. Yamaguchi must appreciate the difficulty of this work as well as I do. A challenge common to us is how we start a movement involving women and men who have avoided the awareness of the problems in feminism. In brief, we should express, as soon as occasion offers, our views that women in religious societies have been acquiring power to oppose backlash and the ability to talk and act through their voices and minds. For that purpose, I believe that we need a strategy of women who “ remake the established powers as their powers as they use the powers, and then ‘ can just barely live ’ ” (Chapter 2 by Masako Kuroki in *Intermingling Grace*).

(Translated by Masao Imamura, English edited by Leigh Fresina, Edited by Hisako Kinukawa)