

Hybrid Forms of Spirituality: The Spiritual Quest of a Woman Priest in Tendai Buddhism⁽¹⁾

Masako Kuroki

1. Introduction

We find that, except for the cases of a few remarkable women in history, the models for protagonists in quest narratives who are seeking god have traditionally been men. The emergence of women who seek to live out quest narratives of their own was significantly influenced by the second wave women's movement in the 1960s. Gender and feminist perspectives have provided the terminology to validate woman's spiritual experiences on her own terms. Carol Christ argued that there were few publications on women and religion in the early 1970s. She found that the very terminology for discussing women's spiritual quests did not even exist (Christ [1980] 1986:xxix).

When the woman named Yokoyama Hôyû took the step of entering the priesthood on Mt. Hiei, one of Japan's premier sacred mountains, and completed the series of priestly disciplines there, she was 48 years of age. She is one of just 103 female chief priests in a Tendai priesthood that numbers nearly 7,400 in all as of April 18, 2002.

Throughout her life, this woman has pressed ahead in her spiritual explorations while steadfastly refusing to make certain either-or choices. That is, she does not choose between immersion in gender roles on the one hand and pursuit of her quest on the other. Nor does she choose just one from among the religions that she came in close contact with during her

quest. Yokoyama pursued her quest without rejecting any of these alternatives or making a single, exclusive choice from among them. And finally her quest led her to find what she calls her “true station in life” in Buddhism. That is, in a Buddhism that does not exclude other religious traditions and that allows for different forms of spirituality.

Spirituality has multiple meanings. It is difficult to define. Ursula King writes, “From a historical, anthropological, and comparative point of view, spirituality always exists in the plural, as spiritualities,” and finds that “these different spiritualities can be seen as different cultural forms” (King 2002: 379).

My understanding of spirituality is that it involves a connectedness with something greater than oneself. For one person, that greater something may be a deity, while for another person it may be a Buddha, or Nature, or Truth. Though people seek it by their respective methods, spirituality provides these seekers with a foundation for their existence that transcends the framework of an organized religion, and provides meanings and orientations for living life (Kuroki 1996:70). Here I will look at the example of Yokoyama Hôyû, which shows that spirituality does not only take multiple forms in different people. It can also take multiple forms, a hybrid form, within the same individual.

Wonhee Anne Joh, a Korean American postcolonial feminist theologian, suggested that we need to shift “our feminist episteme that is radically open to ways of being” that might differ from “the tradition of Western Enlightenment liberalism which demands us to think in terms of either/or” (Joh 2008: 17). In her spirituality of resistance and transformation Joh emphasizes “letting a multiplicity of selves into my being” (Joh 2008:172). Her argument for a multiplicity of selves holds true in Yokoyama’s case, as well.

Here I will explore, with a focus on gender roles and interfaith encounter, how Yokoyama could sustain a multiplicity of selves within herself as a result of her resistance to dualism (Kuroki 2008). The narrative for this paper comes from a series of interviews I conducted with Yokoyama. These include an initial conversation at her home in September 1997, and follow-up interviews that I conducted with her later that month.

2. Gender and the Spiritual Quest

Yokoyama Hôyû possesses a number of different identities. As a Tendai Buddhist priest, for example, she is also a wife and mother who married in her 20s and has two children. In addition, she is a Japanese language teacher who has been teaching at the local YWCA for 16 years. She tells us that as a wife, mother, and Japanese language teacher, “there was something within me that could not be satisfied with just that, and that never let me stop seeking” spirituality from very early on in her life.

If our perception of women’s quests were split, so that we perceived the spiritual and the social as separated into binary opposites, then this woman’s story might not be fully understood. As Christ argues, however, “women’s spiritual and social quests are two dimensions of a single struggle and it is important for women to become aware of the ways in which spirituality can support and undergird women’s quest for social equality” (Christ [1980] 1986:8). The narrative of Yokoyama’s quest shows that her reality is not separated into a spiritual aspect and a mundane part. This dichotomy is commonly found in Western philosophical thought.

When Yokoyama became interested in Christianity, and began attending church frequently, this caused a conflict with her extended family, who are Buddhist. Yokoyama became so absorbed in her devotions

that once she even went to church still holding her baby's feeding bottle in her hand. Yokoyama was finally told that her parents were going to disown her, and so she gave up going to church. But she did not give up searching for truth.

3 . Religious Wandering and Encounter

After her experience with the Christian church, Yokoyama wandered from one religion to another. She looked into various Japanese new religions, but did not join any of them.

When one of her children fell ill, however, Yokoyama started attending the services of a small new religion in a Shinto-Buddhist syncretic tradition.

Ever searching, Yokoyama also went to have her fortune told by Tarot cards at about that time. The fortune teller told her to recite the *Heart Sutra* (Hannya shingyô) for a thousand days. Yokoyama copied out the sutra on calligraphy paper and started reciting it out loud once a day. Two and a half years later she had not missed a day of recitation. As the thousand days were drawing to an end, Yokoyama began visiting the Shinto-Buddhist church more frequently. That group also made a practice of reciting the *Heart Sutra*. This was her second formative spiritual encounter.

When the founder of the church died, Yokoyama went again in search of a place to pray. Looking at a newspaper travel section one day, she noticed an invitation to a one-day mountain circumambulation practice (kaihôgyô). Something about it seemed deeply significant to her, and she decided to participate.

The one-day mountain circumambulation involved walking a 30-kilometer pilgrimage course in the dead of night. Yokoyama set off with

thirty other participants trailing behind an ajari who had accomplished the thousand-day mountain circumambulation practice. They relied on paper lanterns and flashlights to make their way through the jet black night, reciting mantras and walking in total absorption.

A week later, memories of the experience suddenly came flooding back to her. She realized that this was what she had been seeking. This was her third formative spiritual encounter. Determined to know more about the circumambulation practice, she visited the mountain again. At that point, she did not even know that Mt. Hiei was a Tendai institution, nor did she care. All she knew was the *Heart Sutra*. She registered as a member of the religion, and subsequently she was introduced to a Tendai teacher who accepted women as disciples.

Two years later, she formally renounced secular life and took the tonsure. Then she began the 60-day series of practices at the Mt. Hiei training center. The practices culminated in a comprehensive examination (*kôgaku ryûgi*) in esoteric doctrine and ritual that is said to date back to the year 801. She completed it at the age of 48.

4 . Hybrid Forms of Spirituality

When I asked Yokoyama about her “station in life,” she replied:

My station in life is not located on Mt. Hiei or in Tendai Buddhism. Rather, I found it in Buddhism. That was the location, but I am not particularly attached to that religious framework, either. Actually, if the YWCA held services, I wouldn't hesitate to attend them.

At the time of the interview, Yokoyama was wearing a pendant and amulets that indicated her spirituality is a hybrid form that includes Christianity, Shinto, Buddhism, and various other religious influences.

Every one of those influences represents for Yokoyama an encounter whose impact is still felt within her and coexists with the other influences without contradiction. She said:

Probably a priest who only associates with people in one sect or denomination might find it strange, but it doesn't feel at all mysterious to me. I have been guided like this in so many ways... Some might say that this is messy or inconsistent, but I don't care what they think. Right now I am a priest without any hair on my head, and I am teaching Japanese language, and I am absorbed in my worldly life, and I go to the supermarket to buy meat and fish to eat. You see? It isn't that I'm two-faced. None of this is fake. All of it is me.

Looking back over her spiritual quest, Yokoyama feels that she was being led through "an invisible map." As she described that process, it was as though the totally scattered "pieces of a jigsaw puzzle came together one by one to form a picture where everything fit where it was supposed to fit." In 2002, five years after that interview, she erected a Tendai temple in a corner of the property where she and her family live. The temple is named Mushô Kongô-in.

5 . Concluding Remarks

During Yokoyama's thirty-year quest from her mid-20s into her 50s, she had three formative spiritual encounters: the Bible, the *Heart Sutra*, and the mountain circumambulation practice. She felt that guiding hands were helping her along her way in the many different forms of Christian, Shinto, and Tendai Buddhist spirituality that she explored. In the end she discovered her own station-in-life in Buddhism.

Influences from the multiple religions she encountered all remain important to Yokoyama. She does not view them as mutually exclusive. In the same way, as I remarked earlier, she does not treat the demands of gender roles and the spiritual quest as exclusive alternatives, either. The spirituality we find in Yokoyama consists in a multiplicity of ways of being in her spiritual life coexisting with the multiplicity of ways of being in her life in her community as a wife, mother, Japanese language teacher, and Tendai priest

Note

- (1) The author has chosen to use female priest in this paper as a term corresponding to *sōryo* 僧侶, *jūshoku* 住職, and so on. Although female priest and nun are usually used interchangeably, the latter has been critiqued as discriminatory.

References

- CHRIST, Carol P., 1980, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on a Spiritual Quest*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- JOH, Wonhee Anne, 2008, "Authoring a Multiplicity of Selves and No-Self," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.24(2): 169-72.
- KING, Ursula, 2002, "Is There a Future for Religious Studies as We Know it? Some Postmodern, Feminist, and Spiritual Challenges," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70(2): 365-88.
- KUROKI, Masako 黒木 雅子, 1996. "Sekushuaritei to supirichuaritei: nikkei amerika josei no keiken kara" セクシュアリティとスピリチュアリティー日系アメリカ女性の経験から. *Shūkyō to shakai (Religion and Society)* 2: 69-97.
- KUROKI, Masako, 2008, "Beyond the Confines of Duality: Insights from the Spiritual Quest of a Tendai Buddhist Woman Priest," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 24(2): 183-7.
- KUROKI, Masako, 2010, "Seeking a Station -in-Life: The Spiritual Quest of a Female Tendai Buddhist Priest" in Dr. Ronald Y. Nakasone Festschrift Committee, ed., *Memory and Imagination: Essays and Explorations in Buddhist Thought and Culture*, Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo.

付記：本稿は、2010年8月19日トロントで開催されたIAHR (International Association of the History of Religions) 世界大会のパネル“Gendering Religious Studies in Japan”の発表原稿に加筆したものである。