I. What is the Dissertation About?

This dissertation examines women’s engagement in contemporary Japanese faith-based volunteer groups delivering services and care to their local communities. A growing body of literature highlights the positive role that community-based initiatives can play in eliciting social change, including the power to promote gender equality by influencing people’s awareness, such as gender-stereotyped perceptions, and changing gendered behaviours. This dissertation examines the extent to which women’s everyday interaction and agency in faith-based volunteering helps in cultivating social stewardship and articulating new trajectories of self in Japanese society at large. The research draws upon a survey conducted in Japan from 2009 to 2010 on five faith-based volunteer groups: two Shinnyo-en-sponsored groups; two Risshō Kōseikai-sponsored groups; and one Catholic group. By reporting the life-stories of women engaged in faith-based volunteering, this dissertation aims to provide examples of the kind of trajectories and empowering or disempowering practices generated in the cultural context of the Japanese faith-based volunteer group.

II. What are the Main Themes and Objectives?

In order to provide a comprehensive picture of both women’s sources and trajectories, and the settings where they can venture into newer narratives, the research contained in this dissertation aims to disentangle and explain how women take action while complying with and resisting the discourses and conditions that shape their lives, and interrogates women’s capacity for action and its consequences. This work attempts to locate women in the Japanese cultural context of the faith-based volunteer groups as autonomous agents and, by doing so, elucidate in detail, according to their own accounts, how and to what extent their active participation exercises influence on their social identity. In order to do so, this study explores how they locate themselves between
religious organizations and civil society; how they negotiate religious identity and social identities; and how their struggles and debates between individuals, religious organization and state discourses may open new ways of formulating relationships among citizens. It is argued in this dissertation that an analysis of women volunteering in community-based religious social work is a viewpoint we can adopt in understanding changes and transformations that are occurring in Japanese society today.

As such, the argument of this dissertation straddles three main areas of disciplinary interest in the social sciences: religion, gender, and civil society. Sociology of religion and gender studies have largely explored the relationship between women and religion. They have mainly highlighted the structures of power and knowledge inherent in both the construction of gender and the roles of women in religion as an enactment of structural conditions of society. On the other hand, the literature on volunteering regards religion and gender as two important components positively related to civic engagement, which in turn is deemed to foster citizenship and democratization. Thus far, studies produced in the sociology of religion and those discussing the relationship between religion, gender and volunteering, have been oblivious of their interrelated core investigations: they have largely ignored the important presence of women in faith-based volunteering and the social significance of their active participation, especially in view of their empowered role in Japanese society at large.

This dissertation as a whole challenges such consolidated disciplinary divisions by exploring grassroots faith-based volunteering as a cultural context enabling women with opportunities to become active civic agents in the social contract, and explore alternative trajectories of social self. The purpose is to make an empirical contribution in order to fill existing gaps in the literature by looking at two Japanese new religious movements and one Christian denomination in Japan. It aims at developing the discussion of women’s faith-based volunteering at a theoretical level by testing the hypothesis that religious volunteering works as a gateway for women’s expanded social participation, thus encouraging empowerment and democratization.

Firstly, it tests to what extent belonging to a religious group may be accounted for as the core driving force channelling women’s social commitment. Specifically, it questions whether and to what extent religious membership may become a resource for exploring broader meaningful images of self, rather than a passive embodiment of normative and structural constraints as claimed by most extant studies on women’s religiosity (Hardacre 1984; Ōgoshi 1997; Ozorak 1996; Jones 2002; Woodhead 2007).

Secondly, and related to the above empirical examination, the development of a methodological framework concerning women’s religious volunteering will be discussed. This consideration will highlight how focusing on actors tracing the interactions among the plurality involved may help in identifying and describing what common knowledge is shared that guarantees their coordination with their situated world. This consists of framing the actors in their shifts, trials and changes while describing what competing agencies (e.g. working woman; religious believer; volunteer; mother) and what margins of interpretation can be possible during interaction, negotiation and discussion (e.g. mother vis-à-vis volunteer; working woman vis-à-vis religious believer). The micro-sociological analysis suggested here is conducted drawing upon “practice theories” (Giddens 1984 and 1991a; Bourdieu 1977 and [1980] 1990; Butler 1990 and 1993) and the recently developed Actor Network Theory (Law...
and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005), which has thus far not found application in the field of religious volunteering.

III. What is the Originality of the Dissertation?

A few studies have explored the role of Japanese religious organizations in civil society and none of them focuses on women engaging in faith-based volunteer groups. Extant research focuses mainly on the structural conditions combined with ideological influence and the socio-cultural circumstances that the religious context and gender socialization bring about in motivating women to engage in social work. No extant work is devoted to understanding the intersection between the two fields, that is, women’s engagement in faith-based volunteer groups. This dissertation can be said to offer the first qualitative examination of the associations between women and faith-based volunteering, and its impact in terms of identity formation and social change to have been carried out. The study is, therefore, innovative in terms of developing the discussion of women’s faith-based volunteering at a theoretical level. Methodologically, it also takes a different approach favouring a practice-centred stance, which helps going beyond the secular versus religious polarizations and the sectorialised approach of disciplines (such as sociology of religion, gender studies, civil society studies) and fields (private versus public; religion versus politics). This includes an original theoretical framework, which makes an eclectic use of “practice theories” mentioned above, while borrowing a number of concepts from Actor Network Theory – and as yet unassimilated qualitative empirical data.

IV. Synopsis and Chapter Headings

1. Introduction

The introductory chapter locates the work in terms of content and methodology by addressing the salient characteristics of Japanese grassroots faith-based volunteer groups where women are engaging and the levels of analysis. It outlines the social role of Japanese religions and the position of faith-based volunteering within Japanese civil society. It then provides an analytical overview of the cultural ideals and social models that are implicitly and explicitly relevant in informing women’s interpretation of their lives vis-à-vis volunteering in contemporary Japan. However, rather than following the established paradigms of resistance to internalized social norms or responses to externalized constraints, this study approaches women’s volunteering as a social practice, which helps downplaying the normative role of belief and gender socialization in order to emphasize the binding role of practice. This innovative methodological approach offers a functional model within which empirical findings can be unpacked and analysed in order to give a comprehensive understanding of women’s agency in religious civil society. The last section of the chapter presents the structure of the dissertation.
Chapter 1. Women and Faith-Based Volunteering in Contemporary Japan: The State of Research

The first chapter reviews the extant literature relevant to the discussion of the intermingled themes of the dissertation: religion, gender and civil society. While addressing the Japanese context, the chapter considers established paradigms of sociology of religion, such as the influence of religion as an institution and a cultural context posing doctrinal and behavioural predispositions toward volunteering. It examines the influence of gender on philanthropic behaviour and delineates the potentiality of faith-based volunteer groups, as a form of civil society, to be sites for reforming gendered perspectives, promoting gender equality and participatory citizenship. The discussion includes an examination of the tradition of maternalism, which political scientists account as a consolidated rationale behind Japanese women’s social engagement. It compares this perspective with more recent scholarship in political science exploring grassroots women’s movements and the characteristics of community-based movements in Japan. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the empowerment discourse in social work, which offers conceptual tools to understand the extent to which women’s agency in grassroots activities may empower them and have an impact on their society and politics.

Chapter 2. Researching Women’s Identity Formation in Faith-Based Volunteer Groups: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Chapter 2 explores the theoretical stance, the qualitative methodological approach, and the principles of narrative and actor-network analysis adopted in this research project. In order to illustrate the micro-social constitutive normative and generative aspects through which women move toward different trajectories of self, this study draws upon an eclectic use of “practice theories”: the idea of the interdependence of structure and action developed by Giddens (1984 and 1991a); the logic of practice as theorized by Bourdieu (1977 and [1980] 1990); and the idea of performativity, emphasizing how the passing of time in combination with the repetitiveness of social practice can extend the opportunities for the exercise of agency (Butler 1990 and 1993). The analysis of women as both autonomous and relational actors is performed by applying some core concepts of Actor Network Theory (Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005). Moreover, by analyzing women’s narratives, this study explores how women engaged in faith-based volunteering conceive their actions and express their experiences, how the community interpret women’s practices, and how sometimes the process opens opportunities for newer trajectories of the social self.

Chapter 3. Profiles of Targeted Organizations and Volunteer Groups: Shinnyoin, Risshō Kōseikai and the Roman Catholic Church

The second chapter is structured into two parts. The first part offers an outline of targeted religious organizations: Risshō kōseikai, Shinnyoin and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan. Each targeted religious organizations is illustrated only in terms of those key doctrinal aspects, concepts and religious practices that are relevant to explain women’s attitudinal and behavioural expectations in relationship with their volunteer work. The second part of the chapter outlines the targeted faith-based volunteer groups: two
sponsored by Risshō kōseikai groups (‘Itabashi Church Social Welfare Association’ and ‘Kawagoe Church Volunteers’); two Shinnyoen groups (‘Shinnyoen Social Contribution Department - Youth Association’ and ‘Univers Volunteers Tokyo’); and one sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church in Japan (‘Yotsuya Onigiri Nakama’). The presentation provides information about the location, the structure, membership, the range of social activities and the detail of those surveyed in the present study.

Chapter 4. Women Volunteers in Faith-Based Groups: A Profile

Drawing upon questionnaire data, the sections in this chapter provide information on the respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics, perceptions and expectations in terms of religiosity, volunteer work and gender roles. The analysis attempts to explore the majority of the components informing women’s volunteer practices and the perceived effects of such activities in their daily life. By comparing overall findings of the questionnaire survey with extant literature on volunteering and other official data, this chapter highlights similarities and divergences with general patterns, thus attempting to locate informants within the larger context of Japanese society.

Chapter 5. Changing Identities Through Volunteering: Women’s Voices

Chapter 5 presents six life-stories of seven women volunteering in faith-based groups: a retired lady, a young mother, a working woman, a middle-age housewife, a mother and her PhD candidate daughter, and a non-religious student. Selected among the 46 interviews collected during the fieldwork as being representative of the socio-demographic characteristics of the overall sample, the narrations presented in the chapter bring up an interesting picture of contemporary Japanese women engaged in faith-based volunteer work. Interviewees describe their biographical experiences, the interaction inside and beyond the volunteer group, the relationships with the religious organization, the ties they build, and the trajectories they attempt while engaging in social activities. Their stories show the complexity and dynamism of their identities and how participating in faith-based volunteering affects on the identity formation. This chapter not only gives voice to the individual, but also articulates important insights of the constitutive normative and generative aspects through which women appropriate and create meanings for their identity and move beyond different modes of self.

Chapter 6. Exploring Women’s Trajectories of Self in Faith-Based Volunteer Groups

Chapter 5 evaluates the totality of findings by taking into consideration two complementary dimensions: the individual’s social identity and its symbolic boundaries; and the group’s dimension, with its customs and habits that may enable or constrain its members to develop the self and social reflexivity. It discusses the intrapersonal and interpersonal components resulting from participating to faith-based volunteering. It also examines the group’s customized practices informing the way members communicate and interact with external actors, thus informing their capacity to spiralling out creating newer meanings and attitudes. The chapter shows that while women volunteers of faith-based groups may complement mainstream discourses about the sort of volunteer work citizens should provide, they
tend to play institutionalized roles instrumentally to promote better services, thus exploring and playing new civic functions in the social contract. In conclusion, the empirical data presented in this dissertation help explaining how belonging to a religious organization may become a resource for broader meaningful images of the self, which is crucial for women’s larger engagement in society, empowerment and democratization.

V. Conclusion

The concluding sixth chapter evaluates the range of arguments that have been discussed throughout the dissertation. What emerges is that previous studies of women engaged in faith-based volunteering have tended to overlook their engagement for cultural, structural and socio-economic reasons. Scholarship has emphasized an exclusionary logic addressing gender and religious socialization, on the one hand, and socio-economic structural pressures, one the other, as deeply-rooted constraining conditions hindering women from becoming active agents of change in the field of faith-based volunteering. This dissertation argues that all those components matter, but suggests that they explain only the type and rate of participation, and not whether and to what extent participation affects women’s lives. The bottom-up practice-centred perspective adopted in this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the normative and generative role that women’s inclusion in certain areas of practice is able to engender. In this respect, this study suggests it is worth challenging the paradox of linking empowerment and social change with religious settings that tend to be connoted by conservative gendered practices. The dissertation argues conclusively that women’s engagement in faith-based volunteering may be viewed as a vehicle for promoting gender equality and democratization to the same extent of many other community-based movements and civil society groups.