The Social Dimension of Shin Buddhism

Reviewed by Glenn R. Willis

Boston College
willisg@bc.edu

A Review of *The Social Dimension*
Of Shin Buddhism

Glenn R. Willis[1]

For students of Japanese Buddhism, and of Buddhist ethics more broadly, scholarly writing on Jōdo Shinshū has been quietly marked by the fact that while Shin is one of the largest distinct Buddhist groups in the world, claiming as adherents perhaps ten million people, Shin has nonetheless been relatively neglected within Buddhist Studies.

This may be changing. In the past two years, a number of wonderful and engaging examinations of Shin texts and thinkers have been published, including but not limited to: *The Promise of Amida Buddha: Hōnen's Path to Bliss*, translated by Joji Atone and Yoko Hayashi (Wisdom, 2011); *Cultivating Spirituality: A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, edited by Mark Bloom and Robert Rhodes (SUNY, 2011); and *Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō: The Collection of Passages Expounding the True Teaching, Living, Faith, and Realizing of the Pure*

---
[1] Boston College. Email: willisg@bc.edu

Land, D. T. Suzuki's translation edited under the supervision of Sengaku Mayeda (Oxford, 2012).

This current focus on Shin's Kamakura founders, on textual translation, and on modern philosophical explication of Shin insights, has offered students a renewed sense of the depth of Shin thought, but also largely continues the aims and interests of previous scholarship. In the introduction to his recent edited volume, *The Social Dimension of Shin Buddhism* (Brill, 2010), Ugo Dessi notes that English-language works on Shin have largely "reflected a sectarian approach, namely, the interest of Shin Buddhist believers in their own tradition and their concern about promoting their religion within a wider audience of readers, or [these works] have attempted to develop forms of interreligious dialogue with Christianity and philosophical discourses" (1). Dessi writes that he and his contributors offer, instead, "a collective attempt to address the significance of the social dimension of Shin Buddhism . . . through the lenses of religious studies, understood as the publicly testable explanation of religious phenomena as empirical and historical data" (10).

It is possible to disagree with Dessi's view that past scholars and students of Shin have been "sectarian" in any narrowly apologetic sense. But certainly there have been relatively few examinations of Shin as it has functioned as a social ethos, embedded within a national history. (And the student of Buddhist ethics should have some sense of how those ethics have fared, when faced with sometimes intractable social challenges, and the problem of violence.)

The Social Dimension of Shin Buddhism is a collection of seven essays, five of which focus on Shin and Japanese society in the twentieth century. I will offer brief thoughts on each essay here, before suggesting a brief critique of the book, and a view of the relationship between normative Buddhist ethics and the historical study of Buddhist social-institutional ethics, at the end of this review.

Martin Repp begins the volume with a very fine historical review of Kamakura-period Tendai and Hossō criticisms of Hōnen's Jōdoshū teachings, noting the ways that Hōnen's teaching of the exclusive "easy practice" of *nembutsu* in faithful gratitude to Amida Buddha was perceived by his religious opponents as both ultimately antinomian, and as a solvent to traditional institutional monastic control over ritual and income. (And precisely because these early institutional critics seem to have been surprised by the expansive popularity of Honen's teachings, this reader would have liked to have further hypotheses about reasons why these teachings were so welcome at precisely this time, and why the monasteries so easily lost control.) Most importantly for the rest of the collection, Repp's essay includes an extended discussion of the ideal equality of all practitioners in Honen's Jōdoshū teaching. This theme of ideal equality, deepened by Honen's disciple, Shinran ("founder" of Jōdo Shinshū), in his discussion of *dōbō* (fellow companions), is implicit as a Shin category of potential and active self-critique throughout much of the rest of the book.

Equality is a particularly relevant category for the two essays that discuss historical Jōdo Shinshū treatment of the *burakumin*, "people who live, or whose relatives have lived, in discriminated-against village areas [. . . and who face] severe forms of discrimination and exclusion, which are especially apparent in social practices excluding *burakumin* from marriage, property, and employment relationships with other groups in Japanese society" (138). The second essay in the collection, Galen Amstutz's lengthy "Shin Buddhism and *Burakumin* in the Edo Period," is suitable primarily for period specialists and those interested in a comparison of groups who function on social margins, in part because the essay is infused with a historical technical vocabulary that it does not always adequately explain when first deployed. Nonetheless, the book's focus on *burakumin* is amply justified by Jessica Main's careful examination of Takeuchi Ryo'on's twentieth-century career as a Shin social justice advocate on behalf of *buraku*, and as an institutional-moral

thinker informed, like some Shin version of Reinhold Niebuhr, by a dark but humanely moral philosophical anthropology.

Simone Heidegger's chapter on gender, discrimination, and reform within the two main branches of Shin Buddhism in the last quarter of the twentieth century is also a meditation on the theme of equality as an ideal in explicit and generative tension with institutional practice. Heidegger, unlike other contributors, makes several explicit connections between Shin religious thought and creative social practice. "Becoming aware of one's own discriminatory disposition," for example, was understood as "a central aspect of the religious experience of *shinjin* [true entrusting]" (195). The achievement of institutional equality for Shin women seems driven, remarkably, by disciplined and institutionally influential religious reflection.

Melissa Anne-Marie Curley's chapter on Kiyozawa Manshi's early-twentieth-century leadership of Shinshū (Ōtani) University shows that Kiyozawa drew on "a specifically liberal language of individual self-sovereignty and universal equality in order to articulate the ways in which a Shinshū education should be different from other kinds of education" (133). Curley skillfully articulates the nationalizing and modernizing pressure on Kiyozawa, and on Japanese formal education more broadly, throughout the Meiji era. Provocatively, and helpfully, Curley also offers a series of broader reflections on Buddhist universities as products of modernity. She writes that, while "efforts to position the sectarian university as oriented toward the cultivation of human beings may be seen as a strategy for making the sectarian university relevant to the contemporary situation, and thus attractive to the modern student" (112-13), Buddhism as a humanism is in fact a century-old and liberally embedded educational equation. Curley's chapter skillfully traces the ambivalent lineage and sources of this rhetoric.

Most engaging for this reader were the volume's reflections on contemporary Shin in the context of globalization and secularization. Elisabetta Porcu's chapter on Shin in Japanese popular culture (*anime*

biographical movies on Shinran, *manga* commentaries on the *Tannishō*, etc.) offers the reader a very suggestive account of Shin's representations in contemporary entertainment media. The author's application of Walter Benjamin's thought to Shin's media representations, however, would have benefited from further development. Porcu writes that contemporary Shin reproductions in *anime* and *manga* make Shinran "more approachable through his mediated 'cartoonized' double, his 'aura' fades, and his figure steps out of the realm of the sacred into the realm of a fictitious reality" (219). I found this discussion frustratingly vague, however: what are the actual implications of Shinran "stepping out of the realm of the sacred" in this particular way, and does it really make him or anyone else "more approachable" in any sense? An easy appropriation is not necessarily an influential one, but I simply don't know enough about the cultural consumption of *anime* or *manga* to judge what this greater approachability might actually mean, religiously or ethically.

Dessi's introduction and his final chapter, "Shin Buddhism and Globalization," are attractive in part because they promise an engagement with the fate of Jōdo Shinshū ethical sensibility and practice in the contemporary world. Dessi, after mentioning that "more than 10 million Japanese are affiliated" with Jōdo Shinshū, then adds: "however weak their religious consciousness might be" (2). This comment cries out for further examination and discussion, particularly because the content of Dessi's final chapter depends so heavily on survey data regarding lay and ordained attitudes toward *burakumin* discrimination, religious pluralism, full state control of education, and political officials' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine memorializing the war dead (all taken as instances of 'globalization' in Shin, though this label lacks enough analytic content to be meaningful when applied to these issues). And if the survey data rests on relatively weak levels of 'consciousness' or commitment, how should we understand the argumentative relevance of such data? The survey finds "a strong link between religious exclusivism and instances of ethno-cultural defense," but do we need surveys to tell us such

things? It is frustrating to know that an author recognizes something "weak" in the cultural expression of a major contemporary religious tradition—a weakness that others have also mentioned, both in and out of print—and then to receive no real analysis of that weakness. This is all the more bothersome because the first half of this final chapter is dedicated to a broad discussion of secularization. And yet the essay doesn't return to these issues in any depth at the end of the survey analysis, which simply concludes the book.

My own sense is that the collection's "secular" methodological commitment to the "publicly testable explanation of religious phenomena," is finally unable to fully interpret those phenomena. A Shin religious or philosophical thinker may examine the history of Shin social engagement, in order to determine whether her own commitments are actually ideologies that hide abusive or violent practices, or whether her commitments have enabled her community to change and act in ways that it might not otherwise have done. The methodologically secular religious studies scholar, in turn, may examine the history of Shin moral thought, in order to say *why* certain aspects of that thought become important and influential in one era, and "weak" in another historical environment. But if Shin moral thought is viewed as merely "sectarian," it is less likely to help the historical or sociological scholar to answer his own questions, and the community of reasonable moral inquiry is unnecessarily divided. How is it, for instance, that the distinctive and ostensibly canonical Shin "diffidence toward normative ethics" (241) actually leads, according to several authors in this collection, toward such normatively concerned institutions and actors? What is going on? Is that "diffidence" real, and what are the consequences in lived experience if it is? Why is it that Takeuchi Ryo'on, the subject of Chapter 4, only *wishes* "he could say that in his life he had discovered the great heart of Amida Buddha and Shinran, diamond-like faith, benefits in both this world and the next" (142)? What did this mean for Takeuchi's work with the *burakumin*? These questions may seem to focus on the merely enigmatic, but they are potentially

fundamental for the Buddhist ethicist interested in Jōdo Shinshū as a living tradition, and they are largely unanswered in this volume, though they make brief appearances. Normative ethical thought, and the "testable" history of communal life, cannot be so separate from one another, if either is to be well understood, and if we wish to adequately imagine both ethical thought and action.