

Shinran, Barth, and Religion: Engagement with Religious Language as an Issue of Comparative Theology

by Dennis Hirota

In a world full of Nazis one can be forgiven for being a Barthian. [1]

--Peter Berger

In 1974, with the prominent Buddhist scholar Yoshifumi Ueda as General Editor, a project to produce an English version of all Shinran's doctrinal writings began, eventually resulting in the publication of *The Collected Works of Shinran*. [2] One of the distinctive—and most controversial—features of this translation is the avoidance of the words “faith” and “belief” as translations for Shinran's term *shin* 信 or *shinjin* 信心. Instead, the romanization “shinjin” is used. Ueda felt strongly that, although various arguments could be made against translating *shinjin* as “faith,” including its ambiguities as an English word and its long history as a Christian term, fundamentally what Shinran means by *shinjin* and what is ordinarily meant in English by faith are distinct. As stated in a note published in response to a book review:

It might be argued, for example, that “faith” expresses certain aspects of *shinjin*—such as entrusting or being free of doubt—and that use of the term would help place Shinran's teaching in the context of Buddhist tradition, or more broadly, among the religious traditions of man. We have felt, however, that using “faith” to translate *shinjin* would create a serious obstacle in transmitting the essence of Shinran's thought, which is our primary goal. Only rarely will a misleading translation of a single term make the entire work of a religious thinker—from its foundations through all its ramifications—impossible to grasp. But this is the case with *shinjin*. [3]

Ueda's basic thinking is stated:

The fundamental difference between *shinjin* and faith is that while the concept of faith stands on the duality of God (creator) and man (created), *shinjin* is the oneness of Buddha and man, or man's becoming a Buddha.

Throughout the translation project, for more than two decades, the romanization of “shinjin” was constantly at issue, including after Ueda's withdrawal from the project. I continue to believe, however, that the use of *shinjin* and the avoidance of the term “faith” was correct, although I would no longer state the issue as simply as in the 1981 note quoted above.

In this article, I will venture some further comparative comments regarding the Buddhist and Christian traditions. Rather than attempt to sketch a possible systematization of Buddhist thought or a persuasive worldview rooted in Buddhist teachings, however, I will seek here simply to outline aspects of a preliminary issue that I believe may require attention by Buddhists before directly tackling other theological problems effectively. This is the question of the nature of religious texts and teachings themselves. If theology concerns the self-understanding of the person engaged with the teachings of a religious tradition, it stands upon assumptions regarding the nature of the teachings and of engagement with them.

I will seek to highlight certain of these assumptions as they become problematic in Buddhist traditions. My particular concerns here center on the problem of the stances of speaker and

listener implied in Buddhist teachings, and may be illuminated through a comparative consideration focusing on the thought of the medieval Japanese Pure Land Buddhist thinker and religious leader Shinran (1173-1263) together with the Christian theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968).

The selection of Shinran and Barth in order to propose general comments about the nature of a Buddhist theology may seem inappropriate. Even among the various forms of Pure Land Buddhism, Shinran's Jōdo Shinshū (Shin Buddhist tradition) represents the furthestmost development of trends towards the thorough rejection of "self-power" and an emphasis on "shinjin" (authentic entrusting), and Barth is often portrayed as the exemplar of "neo-orthodox" and exclusivist attitudes in modern Christian theology, a proponent of a "positivism of revelation."

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for taking up a consideration of these two figures here. To begin, our basic concern is the elucidation of Buddhist theological thought through a comparative approach, and the close similarities in basic concepts and symbols between Protestant Christianity and Shinran's Shin Buddhist path have often been noted by both Christian and Buddhist scholars. Karl Barth himself, surveying the world religions, noted remarkable correspondences in a number of crucial concepts between the two traditions, mentioning "grace," "original sin, representative satisfaction, justification by faith alone, the gift of the Holy Ghost" and so on. [4]

More importantly, the study of Barth has expanded greatly in recent years, with new evaluations of his thought offered in particular in studies from "postmodernist" perspectives. I believe that such studies illuminate areas for possible comparison between Barth and Shinran, and thereby open up the possibility for exploring resonances between themes in Shinran and tendencies in contemporary postmodern thought.

Above all, however, are the profound similarities in the structures of thought of Shinran and Barth that point to broad general issues in the religious engagement with sacred texts. These issues are sometimes less apparent in other forms of Buddhist tradition, which place greater emphasis on personal performance of religious practices in accordance with, and as the concretization of, religious truth. Nevertheless, the underlying issues involving the nature of the interpretation of religious teachings remain present, and they may be said to be most clearly highlighted in the Buddhist path of Shinran. Comparison with similar concerns in Barth at once aids in illuminating the theological implications of particular stances taken by Buddhists and further suggests areas of difference between Buddhist traditions, including Shin, and Christian thought.

Karl Barth and Japanese Pure Land Buddhist Tradition

Barth's incisive comparison of Christian and Shin Buddhist thought is well known and has been taken up for consideration by students of Shin Buddhist tradition many times. Hence, I will not discuss it here, except to note the paradoxical character of its overall intent. Barth is obviously deeply interested to discover in Shin Buddhism close parallels to Christianity, and speaks of Shin as "the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating" nonChristian parallel to Christianity. [5] At the same time, it may be said that his interest is fundamentally polemical, for he finds precisely in the close parallels between Shin Buddhist teachings and Reformed Christianity justification for dismissing such doctrinal resemblances as reflecting merely human constructs, as human "religion" that stands against true faith. The conclusion that Barth draws from his comparison of Shin Buddhism and Christianity is that, with regard to truth, finally "only one thing is decisive. That one thing is the name of Jesus Christ."

There are two, paradoxically fused elements in Barth's attitude toward Shin Buddhist tradition that will be of interest to us here. One is his mode of thinking regarding what he terms "religion" as human construct. It is possible to see in this parallels with strains of postmodernist thought that insists on recognition of the social and cultural embeddedness of all the works of human conceptualization. According to Barth, truth must have its basis not in the human subjectivity and its machinations but only in the self-revelation of God.

The second general theme underlying Barth's comparison of Christianity with Shin Buddhism, therefore, is the denial of the truth of all "religion" as human construct. Truth lies only in the name of Jesus Christ.

The paradoxical quality of Barth's attitude here emerges because the similarity between Shin and Christian traditions in fact extends well beyond the particular concepts Barth enumerates, deep into his very concern to negate all human-generated endeavor to achieve religious salvation or realization or knowledge of God. It reaches to a thoroughgoing the perception of human finitude and incapacity to apprehend truth in terms of evil, a theme that appears not easily accommodated in current secular thought. Thus, Shinran too, under the rubric of "self-power," proposes a complete rejection of all self-generated endeavor to live and advance "religiously."

This extension of resemblance into fundamental modes of thought raises a significant contemporary issue: Do the similarities between the thought of Barth and Shinran lead inevitably in Shin Buddhism to the same predisposition toward religious exclusivism that we see in Barth? Does it mean that Shin Buddhists and Christians influenced by the theology of Barth—and Barth appears to be broadly acknowledged among Protestants and Catholics alike as one of the most important theologians of the past century—stand in traditions that they recognize to be so similar in doctrine that they are forced to reject, totally and in principle, each other's truth? It seems to me that the answer is no and that comparison with Barth will aid us in articulating a position rooted in Shin Buddhist thought that avoids the apparent logical necessity of religious exclusivism.

In order to explore such questions concerning the nature of engagement with religious teachings and texts, I will take up three general aspects of Barth's mode of thinking that appear to have close parallels in Shinran's thought. The three aspects are:

First, a dualism between the realm of ordinary human life and the realm of that which is true and real; this dualism seems to inform Barth's religious thought at a fundamental level.

Second, the requirements of the salvific working that functions to bridge these two realms.

And third, the nature of the religious exclusivism that appears to arise inevitably from the implications of the first two elements of thought.

I. Dualism

In the preface to the Second Edition of his commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth states in response to critics:

If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.' The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy. [6]

In speaking of a "system" that might be seen in his work or of "the theme of the Bible," Barth is surely identifying a basic framework of his religious thought or of the religious question that he understands to face humankind. Quoting Kierkegaard, Barth speaks of the recognition of the "infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity and its "negative significance." From a Shin perspective, as my epigraph may suggest, both this distinction and its negative significance—which Barth expresses, "Break off your dialectic, that it may be indeed dialectic"—appear recognizable and crucial.

Although in Barth's passage above the phrase "infinite qualitative distinction *between time and eternity*" is used, perhaps we may take this broadly to indicate simultaneously a number of other distinctions or oppositions in his thought between the works of humankind and the working of God, or between our ordinary understandings and valuations of ourselves and our world and that which is true and real, which completely transcends our language and conceptualization.

Further, it is not this distinction of realms in itself that is important, but its negative significance for human beings, which Barth illuminates in his distinctions between reason and revelation or between religion and faith. For sinful persons of darkened minds, however we may endeavor through our designs and judgments to bridge the qualitative distinction between the sphere of our ordinary lives and that which is true and real, the task cannot be accomplished. No form of religious life or effort circumscribed by our ordinary thoughts and conceptions can be successful.

Thus, Barth states:

It is not against faith that we are warned, but against **OUR** faith; not against the place that has become visible where men can stand and live, but against **OUR** taking up a position there and proceeding to live out our lives there The warning is uttered against any position or manner of life or endeavor that **WE** think to be satisfactory and justifiable, as though **WE** were able in some way or other to escape the **KRISIS** of God. [7]

We see, then, that for Barth, we are admonished against reliance on our own efforts to make ourselves worthy, and our own judgments, and our own knowledge of good or conception of religiosity.

Rather, for Barth, religion and religiosity in this sense are faithlessness or unbelief (Unglaube). Religion is not merely lack of faith, but resistance to truth and refusal to abandon merely human attempts to realize what is true and real.

Barth's conception of "religion" appears to correspond closely to Shinran's understanding of self-power. Expressing a notion of "doubt" perhaps not dissimilar to Barth's "faithlessness," Shinran quotes the *Larger Sutra*:

[W]ith minds full of doubt, [beings] aspire to be born in [the Pure] land through the practice of various meritorious acts; unable to realize the Buddha-wisdom, the inconceivable wisdom, the ineffable wisdom . . . they doubt these wisdoms and do not entrust themselves. And yet, believing in [the recompense of] evil and good, they aspire to be born in that land through cultivating the root of good. [8]

Of course, for Shinran, the "infinite qualitative distinction" would lie between the realm of ignorance and the realm of wisdom or enlightenment, or between unenlightened beings and Buddha. But whatever the differences that must be drawn between Shinran and Barth in their specific understandings of the realms infinitely distinct qualitatively, fundamental similarities in the structures of their thinking remain striking. This is chiefly because both

thinkers pursued with great thoroughness the “negative significance” of the dualism of the realm of the human and the realm of what is true and real.

In other words, both thinkers assert a total and basic discontinuity between ordinary human thought and language and that which is true and real. This means that there is nothing that human beings can accomplish that can lead to realization of what is true and real.

Shinran states: “Self-power is the effort to attain birth . . . by endeavoring to make yourself worthy through mending the confusion in your acts, words, and thoughts, confident of your own powers and guided by your own calculation.” [9] That is, for Shinran, self-power includes all acts undertaken to move oneself toward what is good and true arising from our ordinary thoughts and feelings, which are distorted by delusional self-attachment. These words seem quite close to Barth’s sense of “religion.”

II. Salvific Working

The second general aspect of Barth’s thinking that seems to converge with that of Shinran lies in the origin of all power that leads to salvation or wholeness or attainment of what is true and real. Where there is strong insistence on discontinuity, salvation is possible only through the working of that which is true and real. It may be said that the dualism that Barth delineates in speaking of the “infinite qualitative distinction” functions to dissolve the ultimate significance of another complex of dualisms—dualisms of a “horizontal” dimension, perhaps—that have formed the foundation of the modernist mindset: subject and object, mind and matter, man and nature, intellect and world.

For Barth, salvific working takes the form of revelation in which “the unknown God dwelling in light unapproachable . . . makes Himself known.” [10] The primary form of revelation is of course the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. Barth, however, expresses the underlying mechanism:

He unveils Himself as the One He is by veiling Himself in a form which He Himself is not. He uses this form distinct from Himself, He uses its work and sign, in order to be objective in, with and under this form, and therefore to give Himself to us to be known. Revelation means the giving of signs. [11]

Thus, revelation also occurs through the Bible and the testimony of the church. The Gospel as revelation is particularly significant because it raises the question of the functioning of language and its capacity to communicate religious truth.

Although the term revelation is commonly understood to refer to some revealed content or statement, Barth views revelation or truth as dynamic and active, occurring as event and as miracle. Here, I would like to consider two aspects of its functioning, one negative and one positive, but both shaped by the general structures of Barth’s thinking briefly sketched above.

Concerning the negative functioning of revelation, Barth states:

The Gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths. . . . The man who apprehends its meaning is removed from all strife, because he is engaged in a strife with the whole, even with existence itself. [12]

Setting a question-mark against all truths is also expressed as “announcing the limitation of the known world by another that is unknown” (p. 35). Here we see the relationship between the truths within the world of our ordinary awareness and the inconceivable truth that

approaches from beyond. In other words, the truth of the Gospel is not a proposition about the world set on the plane of our other knowledge.

The structure of this relationship parallels that set forth in Shinran's words in *Tannishō*:

I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathagata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. . . . But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.

In the same way, revelation in Barth works to show us the limitations of our own conceptions of our world. Barth states:

When our limitation is apprehended, and when He is perceived who, in bounding us, is also the dissolution of our limitation, the most primitive as well as the most highly developed forms of human self-consciousness become repeatedly involved in a 'despairing humiliation'. . . . We know that God is the Personality which we are not, and that this lack of Personality is precisely what dissolves and establishes our personality. The recognition of the absolute heteronomy under which we stand is itself an autonomous recognition; and this is precisely *that which may be known of God*. [13]

Again, we see that revelation cannot be proposition set on the plane of our ordinary knowledge about the world.

Here we encounter the problem of language, for the words of revelation must be comprehensible to ignorant beings ("the objectivity of His works and signs in our creaturely sphere" [14]), but they must function to disclose that which is beyond conception. This problem was also faced by Shinran, to an extent perhaps greater than in other Buddhist paths.

Barth puts it this way: "God's true revelation comes from out of itself to meet what we can say with our human words and makes a selection from among them to which we have to attach ourselves in obedience." [15] Further: "It is disclosed to us that we do not view and think of God, that we cannot speak of Him; and because this is disclosed to us, it is brought home to us that this is the very thing which has to happen no matter what the circumstances, that we must not fail to do it." [16] Through the language of revelation, truth is disclosed to faith (the "obedience" in the quotation above), but how this should happen is not a matter of human reason or comprehension, but grace alone. Barth therefore speaks of the "analogy of faith" (*analogia fidei*).

What is notable here is that, because both Shinran and Barth share similar modes of thinking regarding the total "qualitative distinction" between human being and what is true and real, they both face similar problems in the nexus or bridging of these two realms. From the stance of ignorant human beings, what is true and real is thoroughly transcendent; it is beyond all human conception. In other words, it completely transcends human language, whether the human problem is post-lapsarian sinfulness or delusional reification and self-attachment.

Nevertheless, in order to make its working known to human beings, what is true and real adapts itself to human thought and linguistic expression. Shinran states:

Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form, called dharma-body as compassionate means. Taking this form, the Buddha announced the name Bhiksu

Dharmakara and established the Forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding. [17]

III. Religious Exclusivism versus Dialogical Apprehension

The requirements of revelation appear to include for Barth what has been called particularism, along with a use of language that allows for apprehension without false reference or literalism, that is, comprehension through an “analogy of faith.”

Working within his historical context, Barth was concerned to negate all moves from the realm of general human knowledge and experience to that which is true and real; hence his rejection of any possibility of a natural theology or any basis for authentic religion in a general human experience such as absolute dependence. He asserts plainly: “We have no organ or capacity for God.” [18] For Barth, God’s self-revelation occurs through God’s activity focused in the single, particular event of the incarnate Word. It is here, from Barth’s insistence on the unidirectionality of salvific power, that the inevitability of his religious exclusivism appears to arise.

Barth’s concern, however, is surely not centrally to deny the truth of nonChristian traditions. Rather, it lies in the illumination of the nature of Christian revelation and, in particular, of the nature of its reception, the opposite aspect of the event of revelation. Setting a question mark involves a searching hermeneutics of suspicion. I believe a similar tendency toward exclusivism arising from a similar concern to admonish against all forms of calculative thinking (*hakara*) may be seen in Shinran. It is for this reason that the force of his critique of self-power and provisional paths concerns attitudes within Pure Land practice above all, and to a much lesser degree locating Pure Land doctrine within the body of Buddhist and nonBuddhist teachings.

As seen above, Shinran’s thought and that of Barth share some general features of a religious paradigm of transformative encounter with that which is true and real in language. This does not mean, however, that Shin Buddhists are likewise forced to assume an attitude of religious exclusivism. In the remaining part of this paper, I would like to consider one of the reasons for this and suggest a Shin Buddhist approach to “other religions.”

As we have seen, both Shinran and Barth may be said to structure their thought employing two sets of dualities: one operative in the “horizontal” dimension of our ordinary life, and one characterizing a “vertical” dimension, in which the horizontal dimension in its entirety forms one pole and the transcendent or true and real forms the other. Both thinkers are concerned with dialectical interaction between these dimensions, that is, with issues of revelation and hermeneutics. Both articulate critical appraisals of human language and conceptualization, and of the impulse to “self-power,” while recognizing the centrality of linguistic “signs” as the vehicle, for us today, of the manifestation and enactment of the true and real in the field of human life.

Barth’s thought has been described as nonfoundational and nonrealist, and in this way similar to strains of postmodern thought. The same may perhaps be said of Shinran. Postmodernist thought appears to abandon and reject any absolutized, objectifying stance for grasping and judging the world, and to recognize that our knowledge about the world is always variously contextualized. This acknowledgment of human finitude and the perspectival nature of understanding finds resonance in the thought of both Shinran and Barth.

At the same time, however, in both thinkers a vertical dialectic functions not only to illuminate the limitation within the plane of our ordinary life—the finitude and incapacity of

human existence—but to heal it. Thus in Shinran, the existential apprehension of human finitude arises as realization of evil in a Buddhist sense, and not simply as a recognition of the historical, social, or cultural contexts that frame our view of things. Evil in Shinran's sense is one's personal inability to eradicate delusional thought and perception that give rise to the reification of self and other, the passions of self-attachment, and the pain, experienced and inflicted, that characterizes unenlightened existence. In short, it is the personal incapacity to realize nondiscriminative wisdom or reality through one's own fulfillment of religious practices.

For Barth, as we have seen above, this human situation seems to demand a particularism that results finally in religious exclusivism. Revelation is single, for plurality would seem to begin a slide into the realm of natural theology and human religion.

What about Shinran? I believe that the basic structure of interaction between the two dimensions I have spoken of—horizontal and vertical—differs in the two thinkers, so that Shin Buddhists would take a different attitude regarding both the concepts of their own path and other traditions. In Shinran, there are two interrelated strains of thought relevant to our discussion. First, as with Barth, there is a tendency toward particularism as a stripping away of various human props, based on awareness of human limitation. In Shinran, however, this particularism is expressed in pragmatic terms, with such traditional Pure Land concepts as the "last age" (*mappō*) and the "practicer of the lowest level." Not only is this pragmatic exclusivism nonabsolutist, it is relatively muted in Shinran, particularly in comparison with the preceding tradition.

The second strain of thinking is of far greater significance. It turns on the fundamental mode of Shinran's religious awareness, in which duality (samsara and nirvana, ignorance and wisdom, being and Buddha) is simultaneous with nonduality. Accordingly, the delusional thinking of ordinary life is pervaded at every point by the wisdom of realization; our ordinary language is pervaded by the Name of Buddha. As with Barth, truth is transformative event, but it is none other than each shift that may occur at any point in our lives when this nonduality or wisdom—the movement beyond delusional self-attachment—manifests itself in our existence.

This means, with regard to the concepts and contexts that frame our understandings and judgments of the world—including religious symbols and institutions, both our own and others'—that what is central is the dialogical apprehension that is itself truth breaking against, and drawing us beyond, the hardening of our delusional thought.

References

[1] Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1970), p. 18.

[2] *The Collected Works of Shinran*, Translated, with Introductions, Glossaries, and Reading Aids, by Dennis Hirota (Head Translator), Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 2 vols.

[3] From a letter by Prof. Ueda and myself responding to a book review. See *Philosophy East and West* 31: 4 (October 1981).

[4] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (p. 10)

[7] (*Epistle to the Romans*, p. 504)

[8] ("Chapter on the Transformed Buddha-Bodies and Lands that are Provisional Means," 7)

[9] (CWS I: 525)

[10] (*Romans*, p. 35)

[11] (*Church Dogmatics*, II, 1, p. 52)

[12] (*Romans*, p. 35)

[13] *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 46.

[14] CD II, 1, p. 51

[15] (*Church Dogmatics*, II, 1, p. 227)

[16] (II, 1, p. 212)

[17] (*Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* CWS I: 461.)

[18] (*Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, p. 168)