

Chapter 6

A Perspective on the History of Shin Buddhism in Japan

Over the years, first in Hawaii and now on the mainland, I have become increasingly aware of perplexity within the Shin community. It is a problem I see reflected in youth who have little understanding of, or concern for, their Shinshu heritage. I have met them frequently in classes I have taught. A similar problem is reflected among Shin clergy who face many obstacles in trying to chart creative directions for their institution. And it is reflected also among the lay people, who themselves do not understand the teachings and who wonder why their children show little interest in their Shinshu heritage. I myself have witnessed what I could consider profound theological confusion, so that there sometimes seems to be a conflict between being Buddhist and being Shin Buddhist. Among both lay and clergy, there is a conflict on how the Shin Buddhist faith relates to everyday life and society.

As I have contemplated these problems, for which — as a Shin Buddhist convert I have deep concern — I have come to realize that, in fact, they have their roots deep in Shin history as it unfolded within the framework of Japanese society and its perspectives on religion. The American Shin Buddhist community is an extension of that history. As I struggled to gain a handle on the problem, I found myself drawn back to the earliest times of Shin history to observe the interaction of historical circumstances and human decision. I also found myself rather deeply over my head in trying to gather the materials to draw this picture, since we must rely largely on scholarship in Japanese, though there are several excellent works now available in English.

The subject has been painful in a variety of ways. It is not an altogether bright picture to contemplate from our contemporary standpoint. To my mind, the perspective from which we may approach these serious issues of the problems of Shinshu in America is one given by Prof. Kitanishi, an assistant professor of Otani University in Kyoto, in an essay on the formation and development of the Honganji Kyodan. He subtitles his essay: “One phase in the loss of religiosity.” [1]

According to Kitanishi who relies on Kiyozawa Manshi, a Meiji period Shin reformer, over the course of Shin history an order has been constructed in the name of Shinran, but in the process of institutionalization, people have lost sight of Shinran and have also had the misfortune of losing insight into the humanity which Shinran himself perceived so deeply and profoundly.

As a result, there has been a loss of true self. Rather, living only by the “other within the self,” the externalized authority and reality that is internalized has been taken for the real self.

Kiyozawa called this loss of the direct self (Chokka no Jiko) and proposed that if one wished to liberate himself from the “other within himself,” he must feud vehemently with the pattern of the Kyodan (Order), the institutionalization of Shinshu which surrounds him. He goes on to say that the new starting point for the Order begins with this feud, that the confrontation is the vehicle for renewal and rediscovery of the direct self which is the focus of Shinran’s teachings. Kitanishi notes that in the past, when this issue arose, the Order had developed suitably as the womb which gave birth to subjective human beings who could endure that struggle. While in the past there may have been people who saw the problem and who engaged in the battle, there was, however, no major reform. One must dismantle the self, says Kitanishi, if there is to be progress.

We would add to this that in order for such a process to take place, one must understand the way in which we have arrived at our present condition. Thus, we need an overview of its historical process as a guide to our dealing with the problem and potentialities of Shinshu in America, and with the present and future of Shin Buddhism in the modern world.

To show the potential of Shinran’s thought and to point out its relevance to our time, we must note that hardly had his long life ended than the processes of the institutionalization and formalization of his teaching began. Some of this, undoubtedly, was stimulated by problems which had emerged before his passing, and therefore, we cannot impute any bad intentions or negative meaning to what took place. Such developments may be negative if they are considered to be the true norm, rather than the working out of a tradition for which the future is still open.

The essential fact we must remember is that we will have departed from the most basic insight of Shinran, as well as Buddhism itself, if we consider the future closed because the past is more real or authoritative than the present. This is the heart of the problem of institutionalization of Shinshu and the consequences for Buddhism of centuries of repressive political control of the Honganji as well as of other Buddhist orders by the state in Japan.

After the passing of Shinran, the fellowships that he began were small informal groups without any institutionalization or hierarchy in the beginning. These groups were scattered throughout the Kanto region. They were, apparently, rather independent and loosely organized. The followers met in halls or in homes but did not possess temples as such. They

were unrecognized as a religious movement and do not appear on ancient records outside the sect. In general, the type of organization taken up in the provinces was the more voluntaristic *ko*, which was organized for the common person. The *ko* was a cooperative consultative body whose leaders were the older and trusted disciples of Shinran, such as Yuienbo, author of the “*Tannisho*,” Shoshin or Shimbutsu.

When Shinran passed away, he did not apparently designate specifically anyone to take over his position, even from among his own seven children. Instead, during his lifetime, one of his most anguished decisions was to disown his eldest son Zenran, who claimed he had been given secret teachings by his father.

During his years of ministry in Kanto, Shinran began with very simple institutional elements such as the *ko* groups, but upon his death, there was an immediate effort to give them firmer shape. His grave was originally merely a marker at Otani, in the vicinity of what is at present the Chion-in temple of the Jodo school. The marker soon became a mausoleum, and then a temple, so that the process of venerating and exalting Shinran as the founder of Shin Buddhism began almost immediately. The emphasis on hereditary succession of leadership was promoted from the beginning, as explained in the essay, “*Rennyō and the Shinshū Revival*,” by Prof. Weinstein:

“Despite the apparent success that these men had in gaining a devoted following, both lay and clerical, during their lifetime, their attempts to reform and purify Buddhism did not immediately bear fruit. To the contrary, we find in most instances after the death of the founder, a common pattern emerged whereby the self-proclaimed followers venerate the founder virtually to the point of deification while they ignore or distort his teaching and often revert to the very type of Buddhist belief or practice that the founder had attempted to reform.” [2]

In this manner, after Shinran’s passing, the process of institutionalization with its implied controls began to take place.

There was, certainly, the necessity to preserve the memory of the founder and his teaching in its purity. Though Shinshū lacked independent recognition from the authorities, Shinran’s daughter, Kakushin-ni, felt the need to provide a rallying point or center — a place of pilgrimage — for the loosely knit fellowship of her father’s followers. There may have been some fear on her part that the land where the marker was placed might be sold in later times,

as well as, also a residual influence of the ancestral reverence so strong in Japan. As Yuienbo's "Tannisho" indicates, institutionalization may have also been a way to deal with heresy.

Problems had already arisen in Shinran's lifetime, and they appear in the "Tannisho" as well as Shinran's letters. Shinran could not prevent such developments, nor could his eldest son, Zenran, solve them. Zenran, in fact, had to be disowned in the interests of the greater fellowship. It would appear from this incident that Shinran did not place a greater premium on blood line over spirit, and that he did not ask, nor designate, any of his children to carry on his teachings.

Whatever her motives, Shinran's daughter, Kakushin-ni, assumed responsibility to care for the tomb in Kyoto, and thus set up the Rusushiki or office of caretaker. By 1277, Shinran's followers in the provinces recognized Kakushin-ni's role and helped to maintain it. Eventually, a more suitable mausoleum was constructed and the care of the shrine became the hereditary duty of Kakushin-ni's descendants.

She was followed in office by her eldest son, Kakue. Next, after some difficulties, it came to Kakunyo, Shinran's great-grandson in 1301 when he was 41 years of age. Kakunyo had ambitions to make the mausoleum and his office the center of the Shin sect. In 1290 he had traveled through the provinces visiting places related to Shinran. He subsequently developed the Hoonko service to express gratitude and reverence toward the founder. He also wrote a biography the "Godensho" to exalt him. He also remodeled the tomb and had a new picture of Shinran produced, a picture which then became highly venerated.

Kakunyo attempted to transform Shinran's tomb into a temple with the name Senjuji, but faced opposition from the authorities of Hiei who objected to the name since it referred to the prohibited Pure Land teachings and used the term which characterized Honen's Nembutsu (Senju means sole practice). Despite this, by 1321 it appears that the less prejudicial term Honganji — which also refers to Pure Land teachings — was in use. By about 1333, Honganji received the status of a kitojo (a temple for prayers), or chokuganji (a temple authorized by the government to pray for the welfare of the country) from the southern court. In 1334, Shorenin (the headquarters of the Tendai sect) recognized its independence from the Kanto believers. Kakunyo also attempted to place an image of Amida in the central position, with the image of Shinran to the side. He was opposed in this by the provincial believers, but such an altar arrangement later came about with Abbot Zennyō.

For Kakunyo to secure his leadership, he had to combine the claim of blood lineage with that of spiritual lineage. This he did by maintaining that he had received Shinran's teaching through Nyoshin, the son of Zenran, who, though disowned, had followers in the Kanto area. As Weinstein points out, numerous factors may operate here such as the transmission through master-disciple, the principle of primogeniture and the right of inheritance belonging to the eldest son. Kakunyo's various efforts to establish the independence of Honganji in relation to the provincial groups stimulated more sectarian activity among the disciples who split into several groups. Whatever their reasons, the disciples somewhat distrusted Kakunyo.

Following Kakunyo, Zennyō took over and administered Honganji under the control of Shōrenin. At this time, Honganji was considered a sub-sect of Tendai. These relationships restricted efforts at Shin development and with the greater independence of the provincial believers, financial problems arose. Notable was the development of the Takata school which in 1478 also became a chokugansho, receiving recognition from Emperor Tsuchimikado.

Fortunes began to change for Honganji with the appearance of Rennyo, the eighth patriarch, in the fifteenth century. At the request of his mother, Rennyo launched a popular campaign to spread Jodo Shinshu. However, in the course of doing this, he incurred the wrath of the Tendai sect on Mount Hiei, which regarded the teaching — namely that of unimpeded light (Mugeko) — as a heresy. In 1465 Hiei attacked the center of Otani and also threatened Takata. Because of these and various other problems, Rennyo moved frequently. He transferred from Yamashina to Yoshizaki near Kyoto. Finally, in 1489, he retired and built a hermitage in Ishiyama near Osaka. Under Rennyo's leadership, Honganji encountered many problems, but grew in numbers and strength, and continued to grow for more than a century until the split between the East and West Honganji, a split that has persisted to modern times.

In historical retrospect, it is clear that Rennyo laid the foundation for the popular spread of Shinshu by presenting the teaching in ways which the common man could grasp, just as Shinran himself had done. In this popularization, however, some of the subtlety of Shinran's own thought was perhaps reduced in favor of clear and concrete belief. Sometimes, in meeting a particular crisis, decisions are made which at the time hold yet unknown implications for the future. Rennyo appears to have forwarded the developing ecclesiasticism and centrality of hereditary abbacy through his own charisma. While on one side he warned against the tendency of Zenchishiki-danomi (dependence on a teacher) as a means to assure people of their salvation, his own charisma created such a dependency on himself and his successors.

Thus, after Rennyō, *zenchishiki-danomi*, still a negative term in its implications, comes to refer to reliance on teachers other than the abbot.

Similarly, in the struggle to restrain the tendencies to antinomianism and ridicule of the gods and Buddhas, Rennyō also counseled obeying the laws of the state. He urged followers not to express contempt for traditional religions. He established regulations to control Honganji and aided in the transformation of Pure Land faith from an individual quest of salvation (as it had been for Shinran), to a group-oriented faith. Through his close relation to the peasants in various regions, Rennyō caused them to band together as local groups. This tendency to sectarian feeling and communality was strengthened through the struggles in the Ikko-ikki wars (known as peasant revolts).

Through all of these various developments under Rennyō Shonin, the Honganji gradually became a firmly structured, virtually authoritarian movement which subordinated the individual to the group, cultivated a paternalism on the part of the leadership, and encouraged a dependency and ardency on the part of the follower. After Rennyō, the Ikko-ikki wars (which have the appearance of defense of the “faith”, or anti-feudalism) increased with the result that the community transformed from one of nurturing trust to one of feudalistic character. To that extent, it departed from Shinran to a point from which it could not return. The *ko* turned into *gumi* — an organization for warfare. Sect egoism grew. The anomalous belief was implanted in Shin followers that one could vindicate one’s rebirth only by exposing himself to the danger of giving his life in bloodshed. This transformation in the character of Honganji took place in the period of Shōnyō, during the Temmon period — 1532-55. The Ikko-ikki struggles were the turning point.

There were many levels in the feudal structure of the Shin order, Honganji-Ikkashū (one family group), also Daibozu, Matsuji, Dojo, and Monto respectively, chief priest, branch temple, practice or worship center, and follower. There was a structure to meet external threat, and internally there developed the centrality of the head with power of excommunication, which threatened the future destiny of the believer. There were strong religious sanctions which could execute a person spiritually but which also were tantamount to physical execution, since individuals excommunicated from the village lost their right to live. It is remarkable that the systematization of Honganji with such strong internal sanctions, could be so very tolerant to outside groups. In effect, in that period, Honganji externally taught Shinran, but in its internal promulgation was non-Shinran.

The joy of faith which should be robust among followers was transformed to a passive prudentialism of safety first. Teaching became indoctrination and was symbolized in the practice of not permitting people to read such works as the "Tannisho" until they were matured. As with most Orders of medieval Buddhism, Honganji entered modern times with no essential change in its institutional attitudes and practices. Higashi Honganji became buried within the feudalism of the Tokugawa and the ethics of the Order took shape within this framework where conservatism was viewed as stability. The history of Nishi Honganji, following the division of the two, was not entirely dissimilar.

In 1602, when Tokugawa Ieyasu sided with the Abbott Kyonyo in a dispute with Abbott Junnyo over the succession of the 12th patriarch, Kyonyo's supporters became known as Higashi (East) Honganji, from its location at Karasumaru in Kyoto. Nishi (West) Honganji was located at Horikawa. This division weakened the political and social power of the organization, for each side of the division was now more subservient to the feudal regime.

After the onset of the Meiji restoration, and the full opening of Japan to western influence, the Shin sect played a significant role in helping Japan face the problems of the modern era. There were positive efforts by Honganji in the areas of religious reform, social work, and Buddhist scholarship and education. Some Shin Buddhists were instrumental in making religious freedom a reality in modern Japan. However, important as these contributions undeniably are, such efforts were limited both because they had strong nationalist coloring and were largely directed to opposing Christianity. It is apparent from later developments that these changes in the Meiji era did not reach the grass roots, rank and file Buddhists in Japan.

Bibliography

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Notes

[1] "Honganji Kyodan no Seiritsu to Sono Tenkai: Shukyosei shoshitsu to Ichidanmen," in Honganji Kyodan: Shinran wa Gendai ni Yomigareuka? ["The Honganji Order: Will Shinran Come to Life Again in the Contemporary Age?"]

[2] In John Whitney Hall, Toyoda Takeshi, "Japan in the Muromachi Age," p. 331