

Chapter 8

Life as Story: Its Importance in Religion and Modern Thought (Part 1)

Professor Harvey Cox, a Christian theologian and scholar of religion, in his *The Seduction of the Spirit* states:

“All human beings have an innate need to tell and hear stories and to have a story to live by. Religion, whatever else it has done, has provided one of the main ways of meeting this abiding need. Most religions begin as clusters of stories, embedded in song and saga, rite and rehearsal ... The Hebrew scriptures are largely stories; so is the New Testament. Rabbis, saints, Zen masters and gurus of every persuasion convey their holy teachings by jokes, koans, parables, allegories, anecdotes and fables . . .” [1]

The story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara (Hozo) who finally became Amitabha (Amida Buddha) is the central story of the Pure Land tradition, which establishes its authorization of practice and guarantees its hope. It was, indeed, through the Dharmakara’s efforts the Pure Land was said to be created. Another story, that of the White path, was told by Zendo (Shan-tao) to illustrate the character of Pure Land faith and its understanding of life and religion.

Throughout Buddhism, parables and stories constituted an essential and fundamental way of transmitting the teaching. The Lotus Sutra is perhaps the most outstanding for this aspect. It contains numerous famous parables which have been universally employed in Mahayana Buddhism. It describes the Bodhisattva who proclaims Buddhism to the people as one who:

“. . . preaches the mystic principle to them with a gentle countenance. If there be any difficult question, He answers according to its meaning. By reasonings and parables He expounds and discriminates it.” [2]

The major founded religions have developed biographies of their founders as the primary illustrations of the truth of their teachings. From varied traditions in Buddhism, eventually a life of Buddha was formulated and the essential features of his teaching and experience have been included. Teachings and religious experience can never exist disembodied. Religion can only take shape in living persons. Therefore, biography and story have always been essential to religion.

In the case of biographies of founders, study will show that they vary from age to age and place to place. There is a correlation between the needs of an age and the way it views the founder of the teaching. To some extent, we can observe this in the interpretation of Buddha's teaching career in the Tendai system, which had to account for the wide diversity in Buddhist teachings in China. The Mahayanists viewed the Buddha's life as an illustration of compassion, stressing that he desired to remain and teach rather than go directly into Nirvana as a result of his enlightenment. This understanding provided the basis for the Bodhisattva discipline, and the ideal of saving all beings.

In general, every generation of a religious tradition has to rewrite the biography of its founder to highlight those aspects of his life which are important issues for their own day. This does not mean to make up a new life and create legend, nor does it mean merely to twist and distort the biography for narrow purposes or deception. In effect, the biography of the founder must become a mirror for our own lives. We must see ourselves in it. It must answer our questions about life and spiritual reality. We cannot simply live with the stories of the past as they were given in the past. We must reinterpret them in terms of fresh meaning and renewed inspiration, for a perspective on our own lives.

Shinran's life is entangled in centuries of tradition. From such a confused historical basis, we must attempt today to discover the character of his experience in a way which we may assess and understand. Initially, Shinran's great-grandson Kakunyo composed the first biography, which he used as the basis for his own authority, and for gaining adherence of the believers to the mausoleum and its caretakers, the descendants of Shinran. Kakunyo clearly presents Shinran as a saint. Other schools of Shinshu composed biographies such as the Shotoden of the Takata school, which exalted Shinran even more in depicting his marriage in Yoshimizu to Tamahi, a daughter of Lord Kanezane, and also the high status which he had attained in Mt. Hiei.

In modern times, there have been important novels which took up Shinran's life. In this regard, the story by Yoshikawa Eiji (and its movie adaptation) is well known. Yoshikawa developed his clearly fictionalized theme against the background of Japanese search for identity in the postwar era. There is a reformist note as Shinran tries to change the corrupt ways of Mt. Hiei. Niwa Fumio in his lengthy work "Shinran To Sono Tsuma," focuses on the human Shinran, the man of passion. Kurata Hyakuzo in his famous works "Shinran and The Priest" and "His Disciples" (Shukke To Sono Deshi), written in the 1920s, presented a more compassionate and sentimental Shinran. More recently there has been the film "Path of Purity"

with Mikuni Rentaro. He portrays Shinran as a reformer and attacking the folk religion. He appears a true man of the people.

Our problem today is, what kind of image can we discover in Shinran for our time? In effect, what meaning can he have for us? What meaning can he have for the Shin Buddhist, and for those attracted to Shin Buddhism in America? I believe there are three productive angles from which to observe Shinran's experience. First, there is the outer course of his life, which we may determine through historical analysis. Second, there is the inner process of that life, as interpreted by Shinran himself, represented in the process called "Turning Through The Three Vows." Third, there was the style of life which emerged from his experience, the style he designated as "Neither Priest Nor Layman," a style which symbolized an entirely new approach to religious existence and meaning.

In relation to the first point, we must locate and take seriously the sources of Shinran's disillusionment with the traditional religious institutions of his time and the direction this disillusionment set for his spiritual development. We must then consider the personal meaning and religio-philosophical importance of the spiritual process through which he passed as the basis for his re-interpretation of Buddhist faith. We must then observe the life principle which emerged from this experience, and which establishes the link between his life and our own.

Shinran can only be relevant to us if we can discover in his experience that which relates to our own. The most significant of the three points, and the one most immediately pertinent to the potential for Shinshu in the modern world, is Shinran's use of religion as self discovery.

Historical analysis yields four periods in Shinran's life. From 1181 to 1201, during the period of his entry as a child into the Order and life on Mount Hiei, 20 years of traditionalism and ardent practice culminated in a religious dissatisfaction which led him down from Mount Hiei to seek a new path. From 1201 until 1207, the second period was his life as a student of Honen, and residence at Honen's hermitage in Yoshimizu where he nurtured a strong commitment to Nembutsu teaching. The third period comprises his life in exile from Kyoto from 1207 to 1211, and the period from 1213 until 1235 he was in the distant provinces, moving from Echigo to Mito-Kanto, teaching the Nembutsu in what might well be termed an evangelistic period. Fourth, after 1235, he returned to Kyoto where until the end of his long life in 1263, he devoted himself to writing.

For him, and for us, the key turning point was at the end of the first period, when with rising spiritual dissatisfaction within himself, and dissatisfaction in relation to the religious institutions of his time, he left Mount Hiei at age 29.

This chapter on Shinran's Life, and its potential for impact on our own lives, might well be retitled "Religion as Self Discovery," for such is the potential of his impact on twentieth century men and women. It is my conviction that religion should act to remove our masks and expose our excuses. Religion should penetrate our facades of goodness, our self-esteem, and reveal to us our true natures. Frequently, religion provides a field for the ego to exalt itself in its piety, by measuring its goodness against those who seem not so good. Not so in the case of Shinran.

Perhaps more than any other Buddhist figure in history, Shinran's thought is an outgrowth of his experience of grappling with Buddhist discipline and of plumbing the meaning of that discipline to its deepest level. The singularity of the religious philosophy which he formulated requires that we take seriously the development of his life as the inspiration of that philosophy. That development, that life process was for Shinran a process of self discovery.

When we place Shinran within this framework of self discovery, against the background of Heian Buddhism which had been his environment since age nine, we should be able to perceive how penetrating was his experience, and how unique the understanding which enabled him to shift the basis of religious life not only in face of the traditional Japanese Buddhism of Mount Hiei, but in face of the entire Buddhist tradition. It is the importance of this religious dissatisfaction, experienced in his 29th year, that makes it difficult to take seriously those of Shinran's biographies that are presented in traditional terms and contexts. Generally, ancient biographies were written not to present the reality of the individual but to exalt him and to glorify the group of his followers. Because it is an early biography, and was written by his great grandson, the biography of Shinran by Kakunyo does lay claim to considerable reliability and has been greatly respected in Shin history. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that Kakunyo's work presents a highly idealized version of Shinran and has given rise to considerable sentimentality in the treatment of his career.

Kakunyo's text begins by congratulating Shinran's aristocratic background, his inclination toward religion and the great advances he made in Buddhist learning. The second chapter briefly states that Shinran visited Honen Shonin in the course of his spiritual search, and that through Honen's explanations, Shinran turned to Honen's teaching. In chapter 3, Kakunyo relates that Shinran had a vision of Kannon who took the form of a beautiful woman,

presaging Shinran's marriage. Shinran is pictured by Kakunyo as assuming the mission of Honen and Shotoku Taishi in promoting Buddhism among the masses. The exaltation of these personages is observed in the identification of Honen with Seishi, Shotoku with Kannon, and Shinran with Amida. In chapter 5, Kakunyo portrays the intimate relation of Shinran and Honen, based on the materials in the *Kyogyoshinsho*.

Undoubtedly, in competition with other schools of Jodo, Kakunyo is attempting to gain the mantle of Honen for Shinran. From that time on, in Shinshu, Shinran was looked upon as a faithful disciple of Honen. There follows in chapter 6 the exaltation of Honen and the influence he gained among the nobility. Two stories are included in which it is shown how Shinran's understanding was closely identified with Honen. Chapter 8 concludes the first section of the biography with a story of a vision of Shinran's disciple, in which once again Shinran is identified with Amida.

In Part Two of the book, Kakunyo details incidents relating to the banishment of Honen, Shinran, and other disciples from Kyoto and of Shinran's mission in the Kanto area as the fulfillment of his earlier vision. In trying to establish the lineage of Jodo Buddhism through Honen to Shinran and then himself, Kakunyo blurs the whole point and basis for the significant impact which Shinran made in Buddhist history. There is not one word by Kakunyo concerning the inner struggle and momentous decisions which Shinran must have made, and thus it seems likely that the significance of Kakunyo's biography of Shinran was its perspective of authority for Kakunyo himself.

In modern times, a popular treatment by the famous Hyakuzo Kurata in his novel "Shinran" portrays Shinran as a very sensitive and sentimental youth, responding to the sadness of transiency which he experienced in the passing of his father and his mother. He depicts the gradual disillusionment of Shinran in religious practice against the background of the corruption and disruption of Mount Hiei. While Kurata does give insight into Shinran's experience of frustration and failure on Mount Hiei, he too easily parallels it to the experience of Honen and thus subordinates Shinran's experience to that great saint. The story of Shinran's marriage to Tamahi, the daughter of Kujo Kanezane is entirely wrapped by Kurata in romantic and sentimental legend.

These are two examples of the treatment of Shinran's life, one ancient, one modern, which — for purpose of their own — do not come to grips with the historical reality of Shinran as the basis for the unique thought he established. When we explore Shinran's life according to the existing original materials, we discover that when he was a youth he found himself in the

monastery. The motives and conditions are quite unknown, but it cannot be because of the early death of his father, since his father also was retired to the monastery as were Shinran's brothers. The turmoil of the Gempei wars, which marked the collapse of the political power and prestige of the Fujiwara, no doubt affected the fortunes of Shinran's family. Theirs was the Hino clan, a part of the Fujiwara. As fortunes shifted, the monasteries on Hiei, perhaps, became the family's only refuge. On Mount Hiei, rather than achieving high ecclesiastical status as depicted in tradition, Shinran is revealed in his wife Eshin-ni's letters (discovered only as recently as the 1920's) to be a Doso, a priestly functionary in the Hall of Continuous Nembutsu in the monastery. Eshin-ni wrote to her daughter:

"This letter is to certify that your father was a doso at Mt. Hiei, that he left the mountain . . ." [3]

The Hall of Continuous Nembutsu was concerned with providing ceremonies for nobility through recitation of the Nembutsu, the name of the Buddha, on behalf of the departed, a practice which had been introduced to Tendai through Jikaku Daishi on his return from study in China many years before. The significance of this activity for Shinran was his intensive exposure to Pure Land teaching in the many services. As he reflected on the teaching involved, on his own condition and that of the world about him, he may have become deeply aware of the unavoidable and ineradicable imperfection and weakness of human beings.

After 20 years of such practice and inner reflection upon its meaning, and upon his own human nature, his sense of evil and sin became so intense that it drove him to seek a solution through seclusion in the Rokkakudo, a chapel dedicated to Prince Shotoku in Kyoto. According to Eshin-ni, when he came down from Mount Hiei, convinced he was a failure, and filled with deep religious dissatisfaction and despair, he confined himself in Rokkakudo for 100 days. On the 95th day, he had a vision or dream of the Prince, and as a result, went to visit Honen. Eshinni reports on these events:

"He left Mt. Hiei, remained in retreat for a hundred days at Rokkakudo and prayed for salvation. Then on the dawn of the ninety-fifth day, Prince Shotoku appeared in a dream, indicating the path to enlightenment by revealing a verse. He immediately left Rokkakudo in the morning and he called on Master Honen to be shown the way of salvation. And just as he confined himself for a hundred days at Rokkakudo, he visited Honen daily for a hundred days, rain or shine, regardless of the obstacles. He heard the Master teach that in order to be saved in the afterlife, regardless of whether one were good or evil, only the recitation of the Nembutsu was necessary. Since he carefully kept this teaching in his heart, he would say the

following when people talked about the Nembutsu: ‘Wherever Honen goes, I shall follow him, no matter what others may say — even if they say I would go to hell, because I have wandered since the beginningless beginning and I have nothing to lose.’” [4]

After instruction by Honen, Shinran became a member of his community. According to his own testimony, he became a worthy disciple and received a copy of the Senchaku Hongan Nembutsushu, Honen’s autograph, a picture, and some statements in Honen’s handwriting. Eventually, master and disciple had to part to go into exile because of persecution of the Nembutsu teaching brought on by the authorities of Mount Hiei. Shinran was virtually ecstatic in later life, as he recalled these crucial events of his 29th through 35th years. In that period, he gained faith in the Original Vow and, with that faith (shinjin), came release from the plaguing sense of his imperfection and anxiety about his destiny:

“What a joy it is that I place my mind in the soil of the Buddha’s Universal Vow and I let my thoughts flow into the sea of the Inconceivable Dharma. I deeply acknowledge the Tathagatha’s Compassion and sincerely appreciate the master’s benevolence in instructing me.” [5]

At the heart of Shinran’s experience in these times was a deep sense of sin which is reflected in Eshin-ni’s brief account and which reached its zenith of expression in Shinran’s paradoxical principle that it is easier for an evil person to be saved than a good person.

Although we have no writings of Shinran directly from that period when he underwent the most important transition in his life, there are numerous confessions from his later life which represent those feelings and the awarenesses which motivated his search and decisions.

“Even though I take refuge in the Jodo Shinshu It is difficult to have a mind of truth. I am false and untrue And without the least purity of mind. We men in our outward forms Display wisdom, goodness and purity. Since greed, anger, evil and deceit are frequent, We are filled with naught but flattery. With our evil natures hard to subdue, Our minds are like asps and scorpions As the practice of virtue is mixed poison, We call it false, vain practice.” [6]

In the volume of Faith of the “Kyogyoshinsho,” Shinran eloquently depicts the condition of beings as he must have realized it in the course of his own arduous endeavors:

“All the ocean-like multitudinous beings, since the beginningless past, have been transmigrating in the sea of ignorance, drowning in the cycle of existences, bound to the cycle of sufferings, and having no pure, serene faith. They have, as a natural consequence, no true

serene faith. Therefore, it is difficult to meet the highest virtue and difficult to receive the supreme pure Faith. All the common and petty persons at all times constantly defile their good minds with greed and lust, and their anger and hatred constantly burn the treasure of the Dharma. Even though they work and practice as busily as though they were sweeping fire off their heads, their practices are called poisoned and mixed good deeds and also called deluded and deceitful practices; hence, they are not called true acts. If one desires to be born in the Land of Infinite Light with these deluded and poisoned good deeds, he cannot possibly attain it." [7]

Later, in the same text, Shinran exclaims:

"Truly I know. Sad is it that I, Gutoku Ran, sunk in the vast sea of lust and lost in the great mountain of desire for fame and profit, do not rejoice in joining the group of the Rightly Established State, nor do I enjoy coming near to the True Enlightenment. What a shame! What a sorrow." [8]

How shall we assess these expressions and the sequence of events that surround Shinran's departure from Mount Hiei? The starting point of that assessment must be that of our first chapters; religion today must be existential. By this, we mean that religion must be grounded in the concrete individual consciousness which confronts the multiplicity of problems and challenges of one's own time. The assessment of Shinran's spiritual crises from age 29 to age 35 ought to be so grounded, to be fully meaningful to modern men and women. Shinran, among all the Kamakura Buddhists, was uniquely existentialist, in that his life and his doctrine mirror each other. There is no explanation of his doctrine apart from seeing the inner struggle in his life, while his life inspired an understanding of religion never attained in Buddhist tradition. He was intensely personal and individual. Yuiembo recalled his words:

"The Blessed Sage would say in his confession: 'When looking deeply into Amida's Vow which was meditated upon during five kalpas, I found it was for me, Shinran alone. Hearty thanks to the Original Vow which is intended to save me, burdened with an enormous Karma.'" [9]

The various personal confessions which Shinran made in his writings concerning his own attachments and passions drive home ever more deeply the personal and existential feature of his thought.

However, it is a problem for many people that this expression of existential awareness is manifested in a negative way through a consciousness of sin or defilement and imperfection.

Buddhism and modern people have a deep confidence in their ability to perfect themselves and to overcome whatever obstacles there may be in one's inner nature to reach the goal of enlightenment. Human nature is considered as essentially good and concepts of original sin or the burden of Karma which Shinran proclaims are objectionable and inconvenient for most people.

As an experience of self-discovery, however, Shinran realized through his practice how deeply rooted in our being are the lusts for power and ego-benefit. The abstract theory of egoism in traditional Buddhism became very real to him. He was undoubtedly unusual since thousands of monks over the centuries had practiced the discipline, experienced their imperfection and went on to do what they could — but, unlike Shinran, they did not leave the monastery nor develop a new philosophy.

In the case of Shinran, it must be recognized that the depth of his feeling went beyond that of the ordinary monk who may have undertaken the various rites of repentance provided by Buddhism, and who then in some confidence went about his duties without being greatly disturbed in his conscience. There is a strong emphasis on purification in Japanese Buddhism. Penitential rites and practices of purification flourished throughout the Heian period, but neither of these traditional avenues of escape or solace were enough for Shinran. Instead, Shinran realized the contradictions of our being and took them seriously. These became the starting point for him, and for him religion was reflection.

Some of Shinran's fellow monks may never have felt serious imperfection or inability. Their eyes were focused outward upon the world and its sins, rather than inward and upon themselves and their own reality. Dogen, for example, never speaks of his own deficiencies, though he was much concerned about the deficiencies of Buddhism in his day. Nichiren excoriates the sins of Buddhism in that same period but he does not show awareness of the potential sin of pride in his own being. Honen generally saw others as more in need of the Nembutsu than himself. He kept the Tendai precepts, which Shinran did not.

Although all these individuals, like their contemporary Shinran, rejected Hiei, they did not do it because they were moved by the deep sense of their own inability to fulfill its ideals. Rather, for them, Hiei was not fulfilling its own ideals, and their departure from tradition was more theoretical and abstract. In contrast, Shinran's was an existential departure, in that he saw he could not fulfill the Tendai ideal himself. With Shinran, there came a total redirection of religious existence, and of an understanding of the nature and basis of religious life. With others, there was a modification either by intensification as in the case of Dogen — or of

narrowing — as in the case of Honen and Nichiren — of principles which were already inherent in the earlier tradition. Shinran, leaving the older institutions totally behind, appears as a truly new departure in the understanding of Buddhism which we will take up in consideration of his thought.

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Notes

[1] Harvey Cox: "The Seduction of the Spirit," p. 9.

[2] Rissho Kosei-Kai trans. "Lotus Sutra," p. 277.

[3] Lady Yoshiko Ohtani, Eshinni: "The Wife of Shinran Shonin," trans. by Alice and Taitetsu Unno, P. 34.

[4] Ibid., p. 32.

[5] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 211.

[6] "Shinshushogyo Zensho II," p. 527.

[7] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 107.

[8] Ibid. p. 132.

[9] "Tannisho," postscript. See also Ryukoku Translation Series II, "The Tanni Sho," p. 79.