

EBS LECTURE

Kiyozawa in Concord: A Historian Looks Again at Shin Buddhism in America

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Just as Buddhism in Japan did not achieve its greatness, importance, and pervasiveness on the basis of its link with the Chinese Buddhist tradition, so in America the significance of the Shin faith cannot be measured only in terms of its reliance on Japanese Buddhist culture. While the Pure Land tradition has a long history in Asia that dates back through Chinese and Indian cultures, Honen and Shinran shaped it into something distinct and valuable for Japan, and in each succeeding generation it became more fully Japanese. Its success in America depends on the same circumstance. In addition, due to the apparent similarities with Western religious traditions, Shin Buddhism has perhaps the best chance of all Buddhist traditions for becoming masterfully transnational.¹

We are entering a world stage. Shin Buddhism has taken root in many contexts and is no longer to be understood as simply a Japanese religion. It is a world religion with the potentiality to bring insight and wisdom to a suffering humanity. Shin Buddhist Studies, hence, has the obligation to open its storehouse of knowledge and wisdom for all peoples, transcending national and cultural boundaries and responding to the yearnings of humanity for meaning and fulfillment.²

Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.³

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¹ Prebish 1979, p. 69.

² Bloom 1995, p. 35; cited in Unno 1998b, pp. 3–4.

³ Quip attributed to Albert Einstein.

From the Shore of Walden Pond

LET US imagine having a conversation about Shin Buddhism (Jōdoshinshū 浄土真宗 or Shinshū 真宗). Let us imagine, however, that we were having it not in Kyoto or in a Japanese-American Shin temple in Los Angeles, but on the path around the shore of a place in Eastern Massachusetts in the United States called Walden Pond. Walden is not important here because it is a major body of water, or because the neighboring town of Concord is a uniquely attractive town on the east coast of the United States. Rather, Walden and Concord represent something culturally significant: from the depths of the past, a core literary-spiritual-poetic tradition in American history; for today, a residential center for modern educated American elites. But if we found ourselves talking about Shin Buddhism as we walked the path around Walden, almost nobody anywhere at the pond or in the town who overheard us would know what we were talking about. So, in the context of this article, Walden and Concord represent an additional quite specific reality: in both past and present, an almost total absence of knowledge or engagement with Shin Buddhism in the ongoing evolution of general (i.e., non-ethnic) modern American culture—even though many of today’s Concordites are probably “night-stand Buddhists.”⁴

A long-term and ongoing failure of communication about Shin Buddhism to these kinds of ordinary Americans is the theme. Concord was a nineteenth century intellectual center in America, at the time when the *gakurin* 学林 (seminarial schools) of the two Honganjis 本願寺 were intellectual centers for Japan. Henry David Thoreau, the famous American writer uniquely associated with Walden Pond, was interested in Asian religion, as much as he could know it in his time. But Thoreau could not know anything about Shinshū, and the *gakurin* of the time could not know anything about Thoreau. It *ought* to be different today. However, whether or not the Japanese participants in today’s equivalents of the *gakurin* (Otani and Ryukoku Universities) think about Thoreau or not, it is pretty clear that Thoreau’s descendants in the fifth or sixth generation of Americans at Walden and Concord or so *still* do not think about Shinshū. Instead, after well over a century the intellectual situation of Shin in the United States still occupies a position of effacement and contradiction.

⁴ A term coined by Thomas Tweed (1999) to describe persons with informal orientations to Buddhism who read about Buddhism in their private hours.



Professor Amstutz at the symposium (9 April 2009)

Why Buddhism? Some Background Suggestions for a Bird's-eye View in the Year 2010

To give this argument as broad a context as possible, here is a summary of some things assumed to be in the background in the year 2010.

- There is a widespread perception among educated human beings in all parts of the world, and not just among hereditary Buddhists, that experience, both conscious and unconscious, is a fluid, contextual, interdependent flow. In the last century, “interdependence” understandings of reality have come to dominate even Western philosophies of knowledge (the linguistic turn, post-Heideggerian thought, postmodernism, etc.) and certain similarities and parallels between Buddhist and twentieth-century Western nonfoundational thought have become familiar. This kind of broad shift represents a dramatic change in awareness compared to thirty or forty years ago in the United States, for example.⁵
- Despite any abstract philosophical understandings and theorizations, however, at an ordinary existential level, human beings typically find fluidity and instability difficult to cope with (although there are some relatively rare cases of spontaneous coping on an individual basis, what one might think of as “independent mysticism”).

⁵ A useful survey of how Buddhist modernist hybrid thought has been generated in the West can be found in McMahan 2008.

- Most human beings seem to find useful some systematic guidance from prior human culture and experience in coping with the emotional impacts of fluidity.
- The complex of traditions called Buddhism (or more accurately Buddhisms) is the leading organized, traditionalized line of human response which deals with that existential question directly and explicitly (that is, without resort to monotheism or other foundational theories of knowledge).
- Among the traditional Buddhisms, Shin has had arguably the most near-modern character. It is a distinct evolute of the Japanese history which among non-European civilizations showed the closest parallels in evolution to Europe in certain respects. It was a product of literacy, psychological interiority and perhaps an implicit recognition of the subconscious.⁶ It was relatively distinct in Buddhism in its notions of spiritual equality and (at least theoretical) relative leveling of status hierarchies.
- Finally, in the twenty-first century, globalization—in theory—has made human cultural resources around the world more mutually available to each other than ever before.

Relative Marginalization of the Shin Voice in America and Some Explanations

Given the above assumptions, a neutral social observer arriving from outer space might think that Shin should have been already, for a long time, an important resource for religious thought anywhere in the world, including Concord. Broad awareness is, however, not the case. Although the situation of knowledge about Shin is gradually improving, it is still a truism, or cliché, that outside of Japan, Shin remains poorly known beyond its special (and as yet dominantly Japanese-ethnic [*nikkei* 日系] church worlds in North America, Hawaii, and Brazil), in addition to a relative handful of specialized scholars of religions. Especially, from our Walden perspective—the perspective of non-*nikkei* Americans with a high-level liberal arts education, who represent an important part of the general American population—it is safe to say that interaction with Shin has hardly occurred at all. We might illustrate this claim by what we might call the “*NYRB* test.” The *New York Review of Books* is a prominent example of high intellectual journalism in the United States. While the focus of that journal is definitely Eurocentric, its contents do eventually usefully reflect major intellectual trends that have become truly transnational. What does a keyword search of *NYRB* articles

⁶ Amstutz 2009. See also below.

between 1963 and 2009 reveal? The term “Zen” has appeared 151 times, the term “Tibetan Buddhism” has appeared thirty-two times . . . and the term “Shinran”⁷ has appeared zero times. Other kinds of literature searches also produce astonishing results. Shin has been mentioned meaningfully in the *New York Times* (America’s newspaper of record) fewer than half a dozen times in the past one hundred and fifty years. The mentions are always (as is universally the case in other American non-academic periodical literature) in connection with the local Japanese-American temple. Judging by McMahan’s 2008 study *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Shinshū has remained completely absent from contemporary creative and assimilative processes in American Buddhism, i.e., innovative adaptations of Buddhism to American life that have been made independently of ethnic traditions.⁸

This communications gap is all by itself so striking that it has become the subject of specialized academic investigation, and so far two monographs have reviewed the strange history of the Euro-American interpretive non-encounter with Shin. One of these drew attention to how Zen, overshadowing Shin, has been constructed as the true representative of “Japanese Culture” and has achieved symbolic hegemony.⁹ The other book tried to evaluate multiple reasons for historians’ and other scholars’ inattention to a range of facts about Shin history, arguing that the entire context had been sharply politicized, resulting in a still lingering cultural standoff between Japanese and Western sides, and also that there has been a certain theoretical inability to process information about Shin (i.e., due to attachments to original Indian Buddhism, or the limitations of Weberian or Marxist sociological models).¹⁰ However, despite their different emphases, a shared underlying theme of both books is that the poor representation of Shin among non-Japanese has been intimately connected to the phenomenon, primarily on the Japanese side, of *seeking to secure through Shin Buddhism a Japanese self-identity, particularly directed at the narrowly-defined audience of modern Japanese people in the modern setting of nation-states.*

This article is an attempt to examine that specific issue—the obstructive force of Shin Buddhism’s modern identity-seeking—from the standpoint of

⁷ Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263).

⁸ See also Prebish and Baumann 2002 and many other works on the movement of Buddhism out of traditional Asia.

⁹ Porcu 2008, especially pp. 23–88.

¹⁰ Amstutz 1997, especially pp. 55–102. Many of the issues elaborated here have been touched on there.

Americans who are like the Concordites around Walden Pond. Instead of focusing on matters of academic orientalism, historiography, or the limitations to reception possibly posed by Shin's *tariki* 他力 psychology,¹¹ the concern is with the somewhat more "naïve" perspective of the people of Concord, Massachusetts, i.e., educated Westerners who are not professional scholars, but merely fairly ordinary non-ethnic Americans (and NB not only White, but Black, Asian and Hispanic people; we might call them the Three Hundred Million, because that is the approximate population of non-*nikkei* Americans) who could presumably use some fresh input of existential ideas into their lives. The article will argue that the grasping after identity by modern Shin Buddhism has directly affected the access of the Concordites to Shin ideas, because this grasping has driven other interpretations off the field, distorted the presentation of Shin in English, and blocked the development of an adequate positive historical paradigm which would explain in a more honestly communicative sense how Shin might be related to a world spiritual history in a way that might interest the neighbors of Walden.

However, before entering that discussion, let us again imagine ourselves back for a moment as that neutral observer from outer space. Let us create a background for the main argument by initially asking if there are objective things we could bring up about Shin, things which are inherent in the religious resources offered by its tradition and history, which provide reasons that would be obvious to the space observer as to why Concordites should be so uninterested in Shin compared to other kinds of Buddhism in America. What are the negatives about Shin Buddhism which we could point out?¹²

¹¹ In an alternative analysis, another article has speculated on the issue of the non-communication by starting with the apparent inconsistency between American interest in "egalitarian Buddhism" and the American lack of interest in Shin; its provisional conclusion was that Americans were largely to blame for the impasse, because Shin's inner psychology, its relative de-emphasis on the cultivation of the isolated self *per se* and its relative communalism, have been fundamentally unattractive and thus resisted in the United States (Amstutz 2003). However, after a direct personal experience of several years in the Buddhist university system in Japan, the author has returned to an emphasis on cultural politics. The previous sort of doctrinal argument may have plausibility for some limited groups of White Americans. However, there is still a very large number of others who are not necessarily attached to those elite cultural values and yet who do not have access to Shin ideas at all in any normal American discourse. A simple doctrinal argument goes too far in dismissing the impact of ethnicized political effects on relations and is too flattering to a kind of Buddhist sense of moral superiority.

¹² The below is a condensation of an earlier discussion which appeared in Amstutz 2002.

To start with, we could say there is something fundamentally wrong with the Shin ideas. We could maintain, of course, that Shin is not “real” Buddhism, for it lacks the Śākyamuni model at the center, with the formal, ritual meditation which is the *sine qua non* of Buddhism, and the precept-observing monastic priesthood, which is typically a correlative sign of “the real thing.” Or, even if we granted it is a legitimate kind of Buddhism, we could complain that Shin’s idiomatic religious language is incomprehensible. After all, unlike Zen, which (at least stereotypically) purports to be a pure “textless” practice, Shin is overtly based on a mythos and relies for its structure on a specialized interpretation of an old Asian Buddhist story. This linguistic/mythic matrix does not automatically communicate, even with other types of Buddhism, and consequently it looks like Shin is a “monolingual” discourse without any alternative approaches to express its distinct ideas. Or, we could grumble that Shin looks too much like Christianity, because Shin’s doctrinal language makes it seem overtly similar especially to certain kinds of Protestantism. Or we could mumble that the liberal, humanist Shin Buddhist Modernist line of discourse, as promoted e.g., by Alfred Bloom, is bland and boring.¹³ Or, we could say that community-oriented “social Buddhism” along Shin lines is unnecessary since many such forms of social religion are already available in the United States for those who seek them. Or, we could vent a feeling that there is something fatally wrong with the Honganjis or the Buddhist Churches of America (often abbreviated as B.C.A.), which have been the historical institutions that have carried Shinran’s ideas. We could respond that Shin’s mere Japanese origins cripple it: the Shin tradition is geographically isolated, making its identity too distinct and foreign. We could point out the ideas were narrowly associated with only one primary thinker (Shinran), and have never been widened adequately. We could tease that Americans do not like Japanese cultural products. We could remark that Shin lacks an ethical/social tradition, being passive, antinomian, and short of ethics, and has failed to have interesting engagement with a suitable range of socio-political issues. We could observe that Shin has displayed too many gaps between its ideals and its realities. In truth its elite ideas are all mixed up with folk religion; it has been involved with twentieth-century Japanese militarism and imperialism; it has dealt inadequately with gender, feminist and minority-group justice; there are unresolved ambiguities about the traditional “imperial” authority situated in Shin’s hereditary leadership; its soci-

¹³ For example Bloom 1990 or Bloom 1998.

ety is generally too conservative, even feudal in character. We could reflect that structurally Shin has lacked the charismatic personal leadership that is a prerequisite for opening up a new form of religion to American audiences.

Or finally summing up, perhaps, we could just maintain that overall there is something archaic and out-of-date about Shin's whole model.

And yet, while it is the case that we could say all the above things, none of them seems crucially persuasive. It has been conclusively demonstrated that Americans are not actually much interested in Buddhist monasticism; the lack of a monastic leadership is indeed often claimed to be desirable in "American Buddhism." While Shin teaching distinctively espoused a *tariki*-based "leap" theory of the final movement to *satori*, its more sophisticated exponents have never simplistically excluded meditation from their approach. "Comprehensibility" is an arbitrary matter that is based on education and convention: when learned as a Buddhist "first language" in traditional Japanese contexts, Shin was perfectly intelligible as the primary (not secondary) approach to Buddhism, and in Japan historically, Shin became the largest Buddhist organization because its language was made to be the most available, accessible and interpretable for the widest range of hearers. The idea of a deep philosophical resemblance to Christianity has never upon serious examination been creditable. Major sectors of Christian religious tradition (Lutheran, Anabaptist, Quaker and so on, as well as many facets of Roman Catholicism) have been intensely suspicious of runaway subjectivity and instead oriented to experiences of "grace" (spontaneous transcendence of self-attachment). Whatever the American Christian past used to be, more contemporarily, (according to some recent pedagogical experiences of the author) the situation with regard to Christianity itself is dynamic and certain old assumptions may not apply any more.¹⁴ The trickles of modern Christian thought that experiment with quasi-Buddhist interpretations of Christianity are peripheral, and for the most merely "swapping out" one metaphysical system for the other is

¹⁴ That is to say, young people in America, not to mention Europe or Australia, know less and less about Christianity than ever, and as they know less and less, their basis for a *blocking* counterreaction to Shin language becomes less and less; in short this means that *under the right conditions* they can potentially encounter Shin language in a relatively "fresh" way. (This observation is based on the author's experience in an Antioch Buddhist Studies program in 2008; the students were non-*nikkei* from ranking American liberal arts colleges.) There may be a *generational* element here: It is particularly baby-boomer Americans who reject any religious language that has even a passing resemblance to theism.

implausible. Foreign origins do not seem to have bothered Americans in the case of Toyota or Honda, for example, and there are no obvious contrasts with other Buddhisms or imported religions (Zen, Tibetan or Sōka Gakkai traditions, or the Roman Catholic Church). Shin Buddhists in practice have always had a strong ethical tradition, with a large history of participation in Japan, although much of the action has been somewhat low-key in its expression: ordinary community mutual aid, ordinary personal kindness, ordinary work in helping professions, ordinary consensus decision-making, the preference in many sectors of Japanese life for a degree of communitarian egalitarianism, and so on; in the modern period Shin has successfully managed schools and social-assistance organizations. Gaps between ideals and realities are endemic to large religions. All Asian Buddhisms in reality have been loaded with folk elements that resonate on different wavelengths than the elite teachings. In the twentieth century both major branches of Shin have admitted women to ministerial status. Shin in Japan today may be an established, conservative, noncharismatic tradition that has difficulty in communicating its conventional conservative message in high-tech consumer capitalist society, but this is a trend that has affected mature religious traditions worldwide and hardly marks Shin out as distinctive. The spread of religious ideas does not in every case need leadership with a high media profile; examples might include the Mormons or networks of evangelical churches.

Most interestingly, in Shin's relative simplification and de-folklorization of Buddhism, Shin actually prefigured certain shifts which, being independently recapitulated, have become part of a kind of already-stereotyped image of "American Buddhism." Observers have identified some shifts as: neutralization of distinction between monk and layperson; domesticization; focus on meditation; redefinition of gender role; struggles over sex and power, authority; eclecticism of Buddhist sources; social engagement.¹⁵ Or, practice-orientation; lay; feminist; psychologistic; socially-engaged; democratic; reevaluating authority; life-affirming (version by Rick Fields); or, nondogmatic; lay-oriented; meditative; gender-equal; nonsectarian (even eclectic); simplified; egalitarian; psychologistic but self-help oriented; innovative; socially-engaged (version by Surya Das).¹⁶ Or (Buddhist modernism in America): rationality and scientific naturalism, interdependence as a

¹⁵ Coleman 2001, pp. 13–17, 116–17, 128–37.

¹⁶ Prebish 1999, pp. 233–69.

positively-toned reality, de-emphasis of folk practices, emphasis on meditation, demythologization, psychologization, disenchantment; Buddhism as philosophy, social activism, environmentalism; privatization, internalization, interiority, equality, democratic ideals, the universal over the local, individual over community, encounter with monotheism as a source of creative tension; romantic expressionism, contest with nihilism, nationalism, eclecticism and world affirmation.¹⁷ Shin certainly does not meet all these criteria, but it definitely anticipated some of them.

The Capture of Shin by “Ethnic” Categorization

Something is amiss here. It can be argued, as above, that in some “neutral” world observed by our visitor from outer space, Shin should be seen, on the basis of its actual religious contents, as not particularly more alien than other Buddhisms that have been brought to the United States. Nevertheless the fact remains that in terms of the actual “politics of perception” Shin definitely is more alien and unknown than other Buddhisms as far as the people of Walden Pond are concerned. One thing that can be said with certainty: Shin in the United States is *conceptualized as an ethnic tradition*.¹⁸ Shin is framed as essentially a culturally bound religion, linked inseparably to a racial/cultural minority in the United States, so that the contrast between Shin and other forms of Buddhism is routinely interpreted chiefly as a division of (often literally racial) interests between Asian ethnic Buddhists and white ethnic Buddhists. This being the case, many of the “neutral” points made above are instantly vitiated.

This phenomenon of ethnic capture might be considered ironic, even unintelligible, to our space watcher. At first glance, any notion of Shin as *uniquely* “ethnic” is peculiar in view of what has happened creatively with other streams of Buddhism imported to the United States. In the cases of several other forms of Buddhism opened up within America by the presence of immigrant Asian communities, non-ethnic Americans have borrowed and naturalized ideas at will. That is, Zen, Tibetan, and Sōka Gakkai streams, which have been considerably more successful, began in America as “ethnic” traditions.

¹⁷ McMahan 2008, pp. 7–17.

¹⁸ See among many others, Coleman 2001, Seager 1999 (especially pp. 51–69), Morgan 2004, Layman 1976.

Furthermore, sociologically, as Buddhism in America “on the ground” has been more and more closely examined by scientists,¹⁹ the overgeneralized, politicized early conceptual categorization of “two Buddhisms,” i.e., “ethnic” versus “non-ethnic” groupings, is breaking down and being superseded by more complex empirical evidence from actual communities. Recent evidence increasingly problematizes the whole category of “ethnicity” as a primary form of classification. Increasingly, Buddhist groups cannot display neat boundaries along such lines. The trend is not new: in Christopher Queen’s introduction to the pioneering study *American Buddhism*²⁰ it was already clear that Buddhist religious identities were in transition, and journalist Rick Fields had already run into a “classificatory bramble” even as he realistically recognized the grip of ethnic consciousness.²¹ Paul Numrich²² and Christine Walters²³ have summarized the initial stages of this debate in the 1990s, which was stimulated especially by the work of Jan Nattier.²⁴ In some latest research, Stephen Mitchell has questioned all stereotypes via an empirical study of Buddhist ritual practices in America (specifically, dharma talks in Berkeley, California). His observations tend to deconstruct even the stereotype of a counterethnic “American Buddhism” pattern (said simplistically to be democratic, lay-centered, socially-engaged, deritualized, and pitted against traditional Asian Buddhism) and point instead towards a highly pluralistic, multipolar transnational web of Buddhism. Such a perspective presumes Euro-American interaction with Buddhism on a postcolonial basis.²⁵ Walters has undermined the “two Buddhisms” categorization at least for the most current situation, linking that approach to a privileging of race and ethnicity as the basis for grouping Buddhists in the United States. Her own classificatory suggestion, derived

¹⁹ As a research topic “American Buddhism” has burgeoned; Numrich (2008b) concluded that it is on the verge of becoming a proper interdisciplinary field all by itself.

²⁰ Queen 1998. Incidentally, Tweed’s 1999 “night-stand” discussion was mainly concerned with the “who is a Buddhist” problem of categorization, but correctly emphasized that the question of identification goes back directly to the multiparticipatory situation in Asian “creole” countries themselves.

²¹ Fields 1998. Simultaneously, Fields also caught the universalizing psychological point of Shinshū (p. 205). In a few pages, his short article encapsulated all the contradictions in the subject.

²² Numrich 2003.

²³ Walters 2009.

²⁴ Nattier 1998 *inter alia*.

²⁵ Mitchell 2008.

from the use of the Internet as her database, is that a quite complex denominational pluralism must now be accepted.²⁶ Janet McLellan's excellent short review of the problem, even though it focuses on ethnic communities, nevertheless problematizes classification at the same time, and as she describes in the case of Toronto, Canada, North American Buddhism today is pluralized and affiliations multiple. The term "convert" has lost clear meaning because the reality is an extensive mix of hybridities, at least among the Asian groups themselves.²⁷ Strikingly, among "Asian" Buddhists, Chinese Americans do not essentially view Chinese temple Buddhism in America as an ethnic matter or as a part of any direct inheritance of Chinese culture.²⁸ Even in the case of Japanese-American Shin temples, some informants report that the situation is growing mixed, with a number of Shin temples (Seattle, Spokane, Sacramento, Orange County, Vista, West Covina) seeming newly to be acquiring significant numbers of non-Japanese members.²⁹

However, while the optimistic (or at least liberal) idea that ethnic categorization is breaking down is an appealing one, the facts of Japanese-American Buddhist experience specifically have been and largely remain somewhat different: Japanese-Americans *have been* different as an ethnic group during their whole existence in America. None of the substantial sociological research so far suggests that Japanese-American Shin Buddhism has been a significant example of the breakdown of boundaries, which may be counterintuitive considering the fact that Shin is the oldest major form of Buddhism in the United States.

The reason for this pattern—which has not been given the correct kind of attention—is not because of any essential racial, cultural, or even religious differences, but because *the Japanese-American Buddhist experience has been politicized like no other.*

²⁶ Walters 2009.

²⁷ McLellan 2008 includes an extensive bibliography.

²⁸ Chen 2008, Chandler 1998.

²⁹ Of course, the sociologists are not unanimous about the breakdown of ethnicity. Numrich 2003 defended the usefulness of the two Buddhisms classification (ethnics vs. converts) against the spate of critical reflection on it since the 1990s. And, certain underlying biases in the Euro-American approach to Buddhism persist, i.e., the notion that true, serious Buddhism consists of meditation, and that a Buddhist community life not focused on meditation cannot be considered significant "practice," but rather only "ethnic" cultural activities. Regarding Shin temples, McLellan's study of Shin Buddhists in Toronto recently (in McLellan 1999) is straightforwardly ethnic. Regarding the Buddhist Churches of America, an alternate group of observers holds that there has probably not been any *fundamental* change in North American Shin Buddhism during the past half-century.

This unique politicization began with the initial competitive “global” setting of the modern Buddhist interactions with non-Buddhist civilization at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which have been examined in detail by recent literature on Buddhism and orientalism.³⁰ The Japanese progressives of the time took Protestant Christianity as their model, adopting Western paradigms into their own as authoritative standards of judgment. Simultaneously, their intellectual maneuvers were designed to establish a counteridentity to the West directed primarily to Japanese audiences. The goal was respectability among foreigners, but not real cross-cultural exchange or active cross fertilization. The initial encounters set in place structural patterns for Japanese Buddhist modernism which have retained hegemonic influence long after the original Meiji context expired.³¹

Meanwhile, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, despite a surface atmosphere of welcome and tolerance, Buddhism in Hawaii operated in an environment of more or less tacit white supremacist ideology. Lori Pierce has shown that Buddhist universalism, as it was promoted in Hawaii in the prewar period especially by the early Euro-American Buddhists, was a Western-controlled understanding of Buddhism as “religion,” which tended to undermine Asian Buddhism as practiced by actual Asian Buddhists. Against this background, the potentially idealist intentions of Japanese-American Buddhist leaders like Imamura were chewed up by problems of identity negotiation and political positioning.³² A major recent consolidation of historical information by Ama³³ has made abundantly clear how pervasively the Shin experience in America was politicized, both by the exigencies of accommodating a hostile cultural climate in the new country and of adapting to modernization as a global phenomenon. Shin interacted successfully, perhaps heroically, with the multiple stresses of modernity, imperialism and ethnicity; it made a proactive adaptation to the American environment (Ama’s major contribution in his study is to emphasize just how active and constructive this process was), yet perforce the adaptation was done entirely for Japanese-American ethnic purposes.

³⁰ Snodgrass 2003; Harding 2008; Porcu 2008, pp. 24–32.

³¹ Snodgrass 2003, pp. 198–221.

³² Pierce 2000.

³³ Ama 2007. Recent publications on Meiji Buddhism in English (e.g., Ketelaar 1990, along with research on Murakami Senshō 村上專精 [1851–1929] and Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 [1856–1944] or on the construction of State Shinto, among other topics) have clarified for non-specialists the stressful transformations wrought by modernization and nationalism on all of Japanese Buddhism.

The reactive process largely paralleled the modernization of Shin in Japan, not only intellectually (Shin had to attempt to come to some terms with the sense of universal or general Buddhism introduced by modern Buddhist studies) but also socio-politically, in that in both America and Japan Shin tried to conform to the unavoidable demands of the state at the same time that it tried to maintain its own (reinvented) religiosity with some degree of integrity. Unfortunately, the American environment was particularly brutal, and Japanese Buddhists were caught between two contradictory poles within American White culture, i.e., on the one hand liberal tolerance and assimilationism but on the other reactionary nativism. As an intellectual result of such pressures, for Ama—even though he is an extremely well-informed scholar with an American humanities education—the unambiguous and unquestioned scope of the entire analysis must be “Japaneseness” whether in terms of international politics or ethnicity.³⁴ In short, because of the particular context of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ global cultural friction—the circumstances that provided the persistent experiential foundation of the entire Shin Buddhist institution in America—Japanese-American experience was non-negotiably politicized through and through in a way that destroyed other possibilities of perception.

Thus, ethnicity remains both the hegemonic self-understanding of Shin by Japanese and Japanese-Americans as well as the textbook *intellectual* understanding of Shin. This problem means that even if we attend to hints of increasing ethnic diversity in Shin sanghas, or focus on modernist Shin humanism with its universalist-sounding rhetoric, nevertheless deeply embedded ethnic identity concerns—explicit, or more often implicit—continue, in fact, to soak up much more of the imaginative energy than the inherent universal claims of the teaching itself.

From Intercultural Politics to Communications Failure

Of course a certain number of Shin leaders in America, during the entire history of Shin’s presence in the country, have been aware—or have at least been consistently willing to pay *lip service* to—the universalizing issue of proselytization in order to open up Shin teaching to larger parts of the American population, and progressive elements in the Buddhist Churches of America have long realized that any long-term survival of Shin Buddhism in the United States would have to depend on an eventual transition

³⁴ Ama 2007, p. 331. For a recent review of the early Buddhist Churches of America, see Nishimura 2008.

to a non-ethnic membership.³⁵ The challenges of membership, ethnicity, economics, teaching technique, and ministry have long been on the radar screen.³⁶ The trouble is that would-be Shin proselytizers in the United States have assumed it is a regional ethnic tradition at the same time that they have promoted it as a universal tradition.³⁷

In one of his writings Alfred Bloom had this to say about Shin beyond Japan:

From my observation, I believe that Shinran's thought completes the evolution of liberal religion as it has developed in western society. It permits a person to maintain a critical religious stance which is a key element in religious liberalism, while at the same time, it promotes a deep religious commitment and devotional perspective harmonious with intellectual endeavor. It makes possible a more integrated religious existence in the western context than is now provided for by many traditional western denominations. For Shinran's teaching and Jodo Shinshu to reach its full potential, however, it will be necessary to deepen its dialogue and involvement with western intellectual and spiritual perspectives. We must now turn to consider the cosmic vision of Jodo Shinshu.³⁸

³⁵ Tanaka 1999. Also see the special section entitled "American Shinshū, Past and Future," in the 1985 issue of *The Pacific World* (n.s. no. 1, pp. 5–16).

³⁶ Kashima 1990. Yet as was clear from Kashima's 1977 monograph, in which he devoted a chapter to how "The American Buddhist Church and the Japanese Ethnic Minority Face the Future" (Kashima 1977, pp. 197–223), the essential perspective has always been ethnic. See also Kashima 2008, where Shin is subsumed in a category of "Japanese-American religiosity."

³⁷ Furthermore, Shin has been emphasized more as a minor 100-year-old American experience than as a major 800-year Japanese experience, and apologists seem more interested in old-immigrant "Japanese America" (whose stereotypical cultural qualities tend to be fossil reflections of lower-class Japan only as it was circa 1880 to 1940) than in either historical pre-Meiji Japan or in the complex, richly educated contemporary Japanese society that has undergone extraordinary change for a century and a half. Thus Japanese-American Shin views are not only ethnocentric in the most obvious sense, but America-centric in the more subtle sense that their own local type of ethnic experience is regarded as chief. Attitudes about de-ethnicizing Shin have been ambivalent to the core; Shin should be construed as a "respectable" form of liberal religion that has its place in the mainstream American social salad, but simultaneously as a "private" religion that "belongs to" an ethnic community. The crucial implication of "ethnic" is localist as contrasted to internationalist, and intentionally the North American Japanese-American community has not attempted to construct itself as internationalist in the way that Sōka Gakkai has done.

³⁸ Bloom 1984, p. 40.

His discussion, however, is an interpretive exposition of the characteristic privileged Shin language (see below). In another piece, alluding to the postmodern environment in which we live, Bloom has taken an extremely wide-ranging view, discussing the travails of modernity and the failure of ideologies and the dangers of science and skepticism. He points to the need, raised long ago as a challenge by theologian Gordon Kaufman, to criticize and reinterpret Shin symbols:

To do less than this would be to retreat into a fortress of irrelevance and to become an encapsulated mutual admiration society. It would be to lose the Bodhisattva ideal of identifying with the suffering masses, guiding and working with them in wisdom and compassion as they aspire for enlightenment.³⁹

Yet when Bloom provides a list of reasons why Shin has not been more successful in the United States, he notes the oppressiveness of the Japanese immigrant experience, the need for social support among immigrants, the patterns of premodern family structure and social expectations, weak leadership, ineffective education, and (finally) some features of the doctrine. Implicit in Bloom's list, although he is a great progressive, is an assumption that Japanese ethnic communities are the starting place for thinking about Shin success or failure in America.⁴⁰

Similar inconsistencies emerge in the work of Taitetsu Unno, who has been another one of the main popularizers writing in English. Unno has noted for a long time that Shin ought to get beyond its ethnicity and become a universal faith.⁴¹ He shares much of Bloom's perspective, also criticizing weaknesses such as Shin's neglect of social critical perspective, anti-intellectualism, lack of an intellectual core, excessive inner-directedness, the tendencies of some of the leadership in the United States to revert in a reactionary way to a Japanese orientation. Furthermore, in a discussion of authenticity, Unno is aware that creative reinvention of Buddhism in America is necessary and could be considered a kind of authenticity; its features should include:

A new vocabulary in English to express the time-honored teachings of nembutsu; systematizing Shin doctrine within the larger framework of Mahayana Buddhism; an imaginative recreation

³⁹ Bloom 1995, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Bloom 1998.

⁴¹ Unno 1986.

of rituals, including chanting in English and securing a place for quiet sitting; and developing the ethical and social implications of Shin teachings. The formal structure will be a natural outgrowth of these changes: training and ordination in this country without going to Japan, ritual implements and vestments befitting our cultural tastes, an egalitarian ministerial body manifesting the *nembutsu*.⁴²

But Unno is a partisan of Shin Buddhist modernism—an ideological product, as will be discussed below, of the politicized modern situation—who reveals no doubts about it. He blames the contemporary condition of Shin on Tokugawa-period scholasticism and authoritarianism, ignores the intense twentieth-century politicization of Shin's relationship with the West, and underplays the damaging effects of the modern period on Shin. He insists in his own way on a privileging of Shin language even as a modernist. He also seems to make an apologetic for the positive relationship of religion and ethnicity, and tends to fall into caricatures of American individualism. And beyond this, one can object that *any* assumption about Shin "authenticity" anywhere could be considered deeply problematic, because of the extent to which authenticity has changed in the Shin Buddhism of the modern Japan itself which has been so politicized.

Be that as it may, the relatively forward-looking openness of Bloom, Unno, and Tanaka—not to mention a number of working ministers of courageous good will—or the existence of writings on Shin which actually sound like they have been created by American writers for a general American audience, has been both quite positive and quite uncharacteristic of American Shin Buddhism as a whole. At the same time, for the most part, the difficulty of distinguishing a meaningful hermeneutical effort from lip service and other embedded contradictions as mentioned above makes it ambiguous to say that Shin has either succeeded or failed to publicize itself adequately in America. What remains indisputable is that the large-scale cultural conflict between Japan and "the West" (with substantial measures of bad faith on both sides, both intentional and unintentional) has persistently led to a near opacity in terms of the actual outcomes of awareness.

A communication problem existed from the very beginning. It is well known that before World War II, Shin was by far the largest kind of presence of Buddhism in North America, and a Shin journal, *Light of Dharma*, was

⁴² Unno 1998b, pp. 17–18.

the first Buddhist publication in North America in English.⁴³ However, the material chosen for this journal indicated immediately what the problem was going to be. The whole run of the magazine from 1902–1907 seems to have offered just one single page of material on Shin *per se* (a letter of Rennyō 蓮如 [1415–1499] in English translation), yet included were a number of articles in which Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966) promoted his own problematic views. Other writers like the missionary Hori tended to be pushed towards being representatives of “modern Japan” and “Japanese culture” in ways that obscured the matter of Shin.⁴⁴ In reality, in the realm of Buddhism, the would-be Shin apologists were also caught between the rationalist, Pāli-Canon-oriented expectations of their English-language readers and the sensibility of their own tradition. Clearly, the missionaries had no form of English available which was adequate for explaining their own Shin perspective widely. Communication was stymied from the outset.

Few of the subsequent Japanese-American Shin representatives, despite the long presence of their tradition in America, seriously tried to solve the problem for any general American public. A handful of Shin ministers (Takahashi Takeichi 高橋武一 [n.d.], Izumida Junjō 泉田準城 [1868–1951], Kyōgoku Itsuzō 京極逸藏 [1887–1953], and Imamura Yemyō 今村惠猛 [1866–1932]) did in different ways attempt reconstructions of Shin doctrine in North America; mainly these constituted doctrinal responses and modifications responding to Christianity and Theravada Buddhism. A book called *Shinranism* was an attempt to introduce the thought of Shinran to Americans (but especially Nisei) in terms of the Deweyan philosophical environment which was current at the time in the United States; it at the same time modernized Shin ideas.⁴⁵ However, no matter how well-intentioned, none of these efforts went anywhere.⁴⁶ Symptomatic was a series of meetings in Berkeley in the 1950s called the B.C.A. Buddhist Study Group, whose initial participants were Japanese-Americans who wanted to make their way towards a Buddhist life which was more than a product of ethnic identity by engaging the question of Buddhist universalism. During the group’s lifetime, various non-ethnic participants joined and the group debated competing constructions of “authentic” Buddhist practice.

⁴³ Fields 1992, a history by a non-ethnic writer, made this clear long ago.

⁴⁴ Several articles were even political apologetics for Japanese behavior in the Russo-Japanese War, and one article declared skepticism about socialism.

⁴⁵ Takahashi 1932.

⁴⁶ Ama 2007, pp. 17–18, 214–85; Ama 2002.

Yet the escape from ethnic definition was difficult; when it was occasionally achieved, the breakout was to some kind of “general Buddhism,” perhaps with an orientalist flavor. No really distinct or interesting defense of Shin *per se* emerged.⁴⁷

It is not the purpose here to critique in detail the history of writing in English about Shin Buddhism, but it can be opined with confidence that ninety-nine percent of the presentation of Shin tradition in English has been developed for the Buddhist Churches of American audience and has *not* been interpreted or mediated in terms of other/wider frameworks of global knowledge, the kinds of things Concord, Massachusetts people would be familiar with from their local bookstores, the *New York Times* newspaper or *Newsweek* magazine. Over time, ways to talk about Shin in English did evolve, but these standard presentations of Shin in English morphed into an idiomatic form of transmission, conceptually and terminologically highly narrow and sectarian. From the standpoint of Walden Pond, that B.C.A. literature has persisted as an exotic and strange corpus scarcely directed to any Barnes and Noble American readership. And despite a handful of exceptions, non-Japanese people who have gotten involved with Shin—for example those who helped shape liturgical practice in English in prewar Hawaii—have never accomplished anything different.

Tracking Back to Japan

The cultural conflict and miscommunication in the United States is easy to understand, given the rocky and oppressed career of the Japanese-American community. However, as Ama's survey in his dissertation indicates, there is a more extensive situation than the one just in North America, and to a great extent the communications standoff can be traced back to Japan itself. The broadest picture is that equivalently in Japan itself the whole modern representation of Shin Buddhism has been shaped by a process of *seeking to secure through Shin a modern Japanese identity for the purposes of a modern Japanese audience*. In other words, the Shin Buddhist institutional experience of modern identity-seeking in Japan has itself seemed to overlap malignantly with and reinforce Japanese-American ethnic identity-seeking.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Masatsugu 2004, pp. 148–200.

⁴⁸ This article is about intellectual perspectives, but it goes without saying that in the background there are apparently various reasons why Japanese culture originating in Japan socio-logically promotes the formation of closed-group communities. For example, the sharply different history of Japanese-Americans in Hawaii, with its more relaxed, mainstreamed

What are the ways in which the *modern* Japanese handling of Shin Buddhism *within Japan itself* has blocked interpretation or intellectual mediation so that the interests of the people at Walden have been subverted?⁴⁹ Two main issues stand out: First, in its pursuit of a modern self-identity for the Japanese audience, Shin modernism encouraged or required a view of Shin in Japanese history which distorted its role and even helped mischaracterize premodern Japanese history. Second, because Shin modernism was a project of identity-seeking aimed at a Japanese audience, its interest in genuine intercultural communication or hermeneutics was minimal or ambivalent.

Bad History: Squandering the Protestant Analogy

Shin has been subject to an intellectual failure to achieve an adequate intellectual narrative for it in Asian and Japanese history. The hegemonic modernist understanding of Shin history invokes a “V”-shaped model: a

world of Hawaiian Shin Buddhism, has not produced any significantly better mediations to the larger American culture. (Kashima 2008, p. 114). According to George Tanabe, despite creeping assimilation to the non-ethnic secular culture and a steadily declining overall Japanese Buddhist membership in Hawaii, a significant element of ethnic Buddhism stubbornly retains its cultural separateness, because its adaptations to American life have involved grafting new elements (such as claims for a globalized ideal human equality) onto a highly conservative static rootstock culture (a deep ancestralist religion). The approach has not involved fundamental cross-pollination or hybridization with the surrounding non-Japanese culture, but instead resulted in a tightly-bounded community which understands itself as modernist, universalistic, triumphalist, and ethnocentrically sectarian all at the same time (Tanabe 2005). The Hawaiian experience might be compared as well to the Brazilian experience, in which Shin Buddhist ideas have remained heavily ethnic despite the absence of any internment camp history. Ethnic identity-seeking has been highly persistent among many Japanese-Americans on the mainland as well. Its salience in the third and fourth generations is a matter of pursuing a sense of comfort in interpersonal relations and a shared ethnic style, leading to the use of temple as a cultural space which provides a venue for such comfort (Kendis 1989). This use is not trivial but is not spiritual either and does not lead to support of Shin as an open-door religious tradition.

⁴⁹ Let it be stressed that the perspective here is that of Walden Pond, and it is not the place to critique the interpretive situation of Shin *in Japan* today. However that it seems to have become apparent to a number of frank Japanese scholars, such as Ueyama Daishun (a former president of Ryukoku University and Buddhist studies scholar, though not a narrow Shin doctrinal specialist) that increasingly in past decades *even for the Japanese audience* Shin language has developed a crisis of intelligibility (Ueyama 2006a, Ueyama 2006b). Similar observations are found in Ishida Yoshikazu (e.g., Ishida 2000) who discusses issues like secularization, the dominance of scientific narratives, and anti-religious sensibility. These critical views about the situation within Japan are important but of course not directly relevant to explaining the position of the *American* people at Walden Pond.

transcendent religious height with Shinran, a decline starting with Rennyō, a deepening decadence through the Tokugawa period, but eventually a partial spiritual recovery with modernization in the Meiji period and the twentieth century. This model depends on an oversimplified negative evaluation of the Tokugawa period. Recent scholarship has provided a critique of the Meiji view of Tokugawa Buddhism as decadent, the pejorative view which has been most strongly associated with the historian Tsuji Zennosuke. The growing critique of Tsuji marks a paradigm shift which has occurred in the last couple of decades among specialist scholars of Tokugawa Buddhism, who no longer see the period as moribund but rather as full of life, energy and diversity. The stance of Tsuji was always discrepant with the research of Japanese historians such as Chiba Jōryū, Kodama Shiki, Ōkuwa Takeshi or Kashiwahara Yūsen who actually focused on the range of Shin-sect materials. For the purposes here, a key argument is that Tsuji had a deeply ideological project of attacking Tokugawa Buddhism in favor of a modernity he saw as ineluctable, and that this ideological need consumed the possibility for any kind of broader appreciation of Shin in Japanese history. Most piquantly, the conception of Japanese Buddhist history centering on the so-called “revolution” of Kamakura New Buddhism (including Shinran’s teaching) which originated at the same time was never so much an empirical argument as a stick with which to beat later premodern (Tokugawa) Buddhism, which could then, in (fictive) contrast to the alleged world of the Kamakura greats, be shown up as “not good enough.”⁵⁰

At the same time that objective perceptions of Japanese history in general were for most of the twentieth century damaged by the perceived needs of modernization and cultural nationalism, these misleading prejudices have also become deeply embedded in the modernist discourse on Shin Buddhism itself which dates from the early twentieth century. Reflecting these, Ama (for one example) is greatly concerned about the *shinzoku nitai* 真俗二諦 conceptual division, a major item of debate in the Shin world since the era of modern reformist criticism of Shin’s (alleged) social passivity inherited from the Tokugawa period. Yet to a neutral comparative sociologist or historian, the *shinzoku nitai* principle looks rather like a salient point of evidence indicating the proto-modern character of Shin Buddhism in Japanese society which began in the late fifteenth century, that is, it was an aspect

⁵⁰ Klautau 2008, especially pp. 287–88; for a strong revision of Tsuji’s work on Shinshū, see Hikino 2007. Tsuji overemphasized claims about the controlling aspect of the *bakufu* system and the weakening of religious faith.

of functional differentiation in society, a separation of religion from state, and a making explicit of a kind of public-private distinction (see below). (In fact, this kind of religion-connected public-private differentiation in Japan was well in advance of the development of similar differentiation in Europe.)

Modernist ideologization is associated with a failure to exploit correctly the “protestant” metaphor or comparison which has always appeared in connection with Shin Buddhism. A careful review article by Kleine⁵¹ has studied how that familiar interpretive scheme, the protestant metaphor for Pure Land Buddhism, has dialectically long shaped the perception of Pure Land Buddhism on both the Japanese and Western sides of the world. Kleine names the elements of similarity usually identified in the comparison: inner piety, a revision of authority (leading to some kinds of anti-ritualism and anti-clericalism) and a focus on textuality (the *sola scriptura* principle). However, the metaphor has never really been handled adequately. First, the metaphor tended to be sucked into a Christian quasi-theological discourse⁵² instead of being thought through in some broader terms independent of Christianity as such. That quasi-theological discourse about Shin was especially well known to German scholars in the early twentieth century, but the effect, unfortunately, was to reinforce a Eurocentric idea of progressive religious evolution, which was reinforced by the conceit of the “new Kamakura Buddhism” among Japanese scholars as well (although the Japanese, as explained by Klautau, were mainly interested in bashing the Tokugawa period in the interests of their own nationalist modernist project). Another distracting effect was that the notion of Amidism as somehow “protestant” annoyed Indologically-oriented Western Buddhist scholars. Such results, though contradictory, in combination created a view of early modern non-monastic Shin as being decadent along with the monastic forms of Japanese Buddhism. A final aspect of the metaphor was the search for a functional equivalent of the Protestant Ethic, which stimulated scholars to look (narrowly) into Shin for signs of a Weberian work ethos.⁵³ Robert N. Bellah’s study of Tokugawa religion, however, which mentioned Shin prominently (though secondarily), reflected a very specific modernization theory which

⁵¹ Kleine 2003.

⁵² Kleine 2003, pp. 152–62.

⁵³ Amstutz 2007. This idea has even appeared as a suggested way to mediate Shin to the larger American public (Fung and Fung 1993).

was derived from both Weber and Talcott Parsons⁵⁴ and has achieved only limited success. On the other hand Weber has constituted a major challenge for modern Japanese intellectuals, but among those who engaged him in the early part of the century, Ōtsuka Hisao was not concerned about Japan and Oguchi Iichi was concerned mainly with the persistence of magical thought in Japan. After the 1970s, Japanese scholars began to counterreact to the influence of Weberian ideas of evolutionary rationalization and modernization which took Europe as the model, and several leading historians began to argue that Japan's general folk religiosity has allowed a different, non-European but still successful path to modernization in the last two centuries. The most important have included Yasumaru Yoshio who developed the idea of a diffuse premodern popular morality with an ascetic side (*tsūzoku dōtoku* 通俗道徳) which stretched across various Japanese religions (including Shin Buddhism) but whose foundations were quite independent of Europe. In roughly the same camp has been Shimazono Susumu, who in trying to explain New Religions, developed a theory that their vitalist worldview was actually quite compatible with modernization.⁵⁵ The point here is that these scholars' controversies, while they offered welcome skepticism about the Weberian model, were also part of a quite specifically Japanese debate over modernization and modern Japanese identity-seeking. Consequently, while they neutralized Weber's theory, they could not replace it with any broad, transcultural approach which would serve as a real substitute, especially from the standpoint of Walden Pond. The simi-

⁵⁴ Bellah 1957. See also Bellah 1987. This Weberian-oriented line of thought has been maintained by Lee (1977), who sustained the critique that a strong autonomous self did not accompany modernization in Japan because the process did not come up to European standards for such autonomy; this has been a recurrent issue for modernizing Japanese intellectuals like Maruyama Masao and especially Ienaga Saburō. The argument reflected modernization ideology, did not question the narrowness and evolutionism of the Weberian perspective, offered a thin and decontextualized appreciation of Shinran, and radically neglected the close details of either European or Japanese history in order to arrive at its generalizations.

⁵⁵ Hayashi and Yamanaka 1993. However, a study of the relationship of Shin and Japanese economic history concluded that Shin Buddhist doctrine in the narrowest sense was not a driver of economic activity, but rather merely that as a synthetic phenomenon it fit perfectly with the Japanese political economy up to the late nineteenth century. That is, it was institutionally isomorphic with features of Japanese civilization including privatization, property rights, diffusion of political power, communications, transport and trade, marketization and entrepreneurship, education, social discipline, and a certain rationality (Amstutz 2007, p. 28).

lar outcome of the intellectual history discussed by Kleine has been that the long exposure to the protestant metaphor has ruled out certain possibilities for understanding Japan, but not necessarily resulted in a widespread grasp of what some *tenable* point might be which actually produces the apparent and undeniable, if hard to pin down, analogies between Japanese and European religious cultures, at least when it comes to the case of Jōdoshinshū. There is a weakness on the part of both Japanese and American historians in developing a theory of Japanese religious history that accounts, in an *adequate* broadly theoretical way, for the partial but unmistakable parallels between Japan and Europe.⁵⁶ And it can be argued that historians who have constructed narratives of Japanese history have almost totally ignored the extended implications of the idea of something “protestant” operating over the long run in Japanese civilization. This means that in the historical dimension, the Concordites—whether professional historians, or just plain global citizens—have been left without any historical paradigm for Shin that can appeal at Walden Pond.

Nontransparency in history has reinforced nontransparency in doctrine. Large parts of the Japanese Buddhist studies establishment adopted the Western bias *not* to see Buddhism as a long-running tradition which *must* have undergone historical evolution along with the rest of human consciousness, as century after century elapsed since the time of Śākyamuni. This was a replication of the Victorian search for origins, the “fundamentalism of the archaic,” which was so characteristic of the early, orientalist Western encounter with Buddhism. As noted by Ama,⁵⁷ in America, in the founding era when Shin constructed its adaptation to the American setting, the ministers were faced with a dilemma (even more pressing than in Japan) in which Shin doctrine seemed to be pitted against the “original” teachings of Śākyamuni. Helplessly, Japanese Buddhists themselves got caught up in a modernization narrative that made their “reform” presentation of Shin Buddhism to some degree incoherent.

⁵⁶ In the absence of any persuasive or interesting historical narrative about Shin, an additional effect has been that almost all of the Western historians who have looked at Shin (George Tanabe, Ian Reader, Clark Chilson, even to some extent Mark Blum or James Dobbin) have been concerned to refute the inaccuracies and exaggerations of Shin modernism and have therefore been more fascinated by Shin tradition’s inconsistencies and contradictions than they have been interested in elucidating the ideas in a modern way that would have any productive modern uses for the people of Walden Pond.

⁵⁷ Ama 2007, p. 7.

Foreigners' Interests Versus Modern Japanese Identity-seeking for the Modern Japanese Audience

What else about the religious doctrinal level as such? Considering that Japanese Buddhist intellectuals have been tangling and interacting with world philosophical and religious traditions for the past one hundred and thirty years (at least in the home territory of Japan), and recognizing that the Honganji-Buddhist Churches of America relationship during the twentieth century had produced dozens of highly educated bilingual ministers, what has been the hermeneutical result as far as Shin language goes, from the standpoint of, for the purposes of, the Concordites?

First, Shin Buddhism still sees itself as essentially a closed and privileged language—a language *not to be compared with other languages*, thus hermeneutically isolated *in principle*.⁵⁸ In other words, a strong bias has been sustained that Shin talk should not be subject to the same kinds of intellectual handling as other kinds of religious talk. Interdisciplinarity must preferably be denied. Shin language must instead be protected, so that if possible it resides purely in its own inward-turned world. The effective result too often is a *de facto* refusal to elucidate the difficult, even encrypted or encoded, nature of Shinran's religious language in a way that is meaningful for general audiences, especially outside Japan. One all too often gets the subtle impression that Shin Buddhist scholars, especially the elites, actually *do not care* if their language is widely understood by non-Japanese in a way that might richly interconnect with other kinds of knowledge. To a non-Japanese reader, the approach of even a scholar like Ueyama Daishun is striking, because while he may be deeply concerned about the intelligibility of Shin for Japanese audiences, his discussion of how Shin language might be revived makes almost no reference at all to worlds of non-Buddhist discourse; it is completely Japanocentric.⁵⁹

Where does this attitude come from? One kind of conventional wisdom is that it reflects the deadly conservatism of the Tokugawa period. Rather, the suggestion here is that instead of looking back at Tokugawa, we should reexamine how the communication of Japanese Buddhism in modern Japan, even in modernist reformist mode, has been affected by claims connected with cultural nationalism and the grasping after identity. Although Japan

⁵⁸ The following observations are based on personal testimony collected by the author from a number of Shin intellectuals.

⁵⁹ Ueyama 2006a, Ueyama 2006b.

was never colonized per se, and Shin was never “curated” by the West, Shin participated anyway in the international atmosphere of Occidentalism and counter-Orientalism in the process of its self-defense.⁶⁰ Blaming the Tokugawa period for the continuing noncommunicative narrowness of Shin language is entirely misleading, since everything about Shin communication in the past one hundred and twenty years has been the product of ongoing deliberate choices by contemporary Japanese representatives of the tradition, whether on the conservative side or the modernist side.

Evidence is found in the ambivalent attitude about genuine communication or hermeneutics which is reflected in the modern translation history for Shin texts, where, from the beginning of the modern encounter with the West, there has been a tendency to produce and sponsor literal English translations that simply do not take up seriously or adequately the interpretation and reception problems of foreigners. The early translations sponsored by Ryukoku University, *The Collected Works of Shinran*,⁶¹ and even (in the opinion of the present author) the very new shortened anthology of Shinran’s writings edited by Alfred Bloom *The Essential Shinran* (2007) are all highly sectarian and focus on Shinran’s language basically as a closed system. From a Walden Pond viewpoint, the translations seem to have been mainly done to satisfy the Shin institution’s own dream, or ideal, or craving, or illusion, about being an internationally recognized, respected religion. However, this program does not really work for any other purpose than quasi-narcissistic self-representation. Turning encrypted Japanese into similarly or equally encrypted English, declaring victory, and then retreating, is not a form of communication. Even when Shin language is decrypted to some extent, it is most commonly “translated” into “Mahayanese,” i.e., the conventions which have come to be established in English for general treatments of Mahayana Buddhism. A representative example here is the well-known and indeed very useful work by Ueda Yoshifumi and Dennis Hirota called *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought* (1989). This book opens with Shinran’s biography and personal existential experience, then concentrates on the philosophical legitimation of Shinran, and then goes into a characteristic closed-system, ahistorical presentation of Shinran’s language. The work clarifies that Shinran was engaged in creative interpretation of the texts, but then emphasizes that what this interpretation disclosed was the fundamental, original, time-

⁶⁰ Lopez 1995, p. 15. The way Zen became associated with cultural nationalist rhetoric has been much more extensively illuminated so far, e.g., Sharf 1995 among others.

⁶¹ Hirota et al. 1997.

less, superior, transhistorical meaning of the texts. However, when a Concord reader faces such an “introduction,” which contains nothing about larger worlds of myth study, psychology, history, or language theory, it must be asked, is this a work of serious intercultural hermeneutics, or a work whose underlying purposes, however cleverly masked, are Shin Buddhism’s self-congratulation and self-celebration? Do we have here the phenomenon of “English translations for a Japanese audience?”

An alternate contemporary approach to the “translation” of Shin, which looks somewhat more open, has been to provide interpretation or mediation in terms of a modern philosophy of religion discourse which takes its language from certain Christian theological variants and continental philosophy. This approach is based on the kind of elite modern university-level philosophy and religion discourse which has been favored in Japan since the Meiji period, but which serves only limited Western purposes (except for a handful of intellectual specialists). The famous lineage is the so-called “Kyoto School” of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) and Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990); it is well known that a great deal of the twentieth-century Otani University tradition of Shin studies is oriented roughly this way. A related example on the Nishi side is a collection of symposium essays edited by Takeda Ryūsei entitled *Beyond Comparison* (1997). The Takeda material is subtle and sophisticated, but the Christian process-theology which is involved in this particular book is marginal to mainstream Christian thought, the conceptual framework remains rooted in the abstractions of the philosophy of religion, and the issue at hand, the face-off between Shin Buddhism’s sense of unique sectarian identity and contemporary religious pluralism, is hardly a question of interest to the people at Walden Pond. Such treatments exploiting apparent “doctrinal” similarities between Shin and Christianity (and Western philosophy of religion) have helped Shin to find a certain footing in twentieth-century discourse *within intellectual Japan*. However, discourse relating Shin to Christianity in quasi-theological terms, or even discourse relating Shin to Heidegger or deconstruction, is unfortunately far less meaningful or interesting for the people at Walden Pond. In general (with the possible exception of the very youngest generation of Americans), it must be said that in any way confusing the doctrinal languages of Shin Buddhism and Christianity doctrinally is an atrocious, or at least extremely hazardous, way of trying to interest the audience at Walden. *Any* use of God-language confuses the hope that Shin Buddhism might have something distinctive to offer.

Another widespread method of attempted communication about Shin is the foregrounding of Shinran's biography, stressing his "personal inability" and the social politics of (relative) openness and egalitarianism which grew from his ideas. Indeed the life of Shinran has played an enormous role historically in the presentation of Shin Buddhism, both in the past and today; the representative example in English is Alfred Bloom's *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace* (1965). Along with the personal biography of the "founder," this treatment, which echoes a typical kind of modern presentation of Shin Buddhism in Japan, deals with the classic Pure Land texts, the idea of Pure Land historical development as "continual popularization," and the human predicament analyzed in highly sectarian Shin terms. But there is almost no framing in terms of a *larger world* of religious studies, religious history, or other kinds of knowledge.

This restrictedness highlights that a mediation of meaning via some persuasive conception of "myth" has not been accomplished either. When Shin Buddhism's sense of privileged language has encountered the modern study of "myth," an unresolved and unsatisfying situation has persisted in Japan which contributes directly to misunderstanding outside. Of course, historically, Shin Buddhism has never really involved a totally static, closed language. We know that Shinran, the founder, was not operating in a fundamentalist, foundational mode vis-à-vis the tradition he inherited, but rather interacting with it dynamically, in *kanjin* 勧進 fashion, negotiating between continuity and innovation. Only during the Edo period were ideas about the meaning of Shinran more settled and systematized via the elaboration of a Buddhist traditional doctrinal language for interpreting Shin. Still, although the environment was narrow, such a hermeneutics was completely understandable in its own *premodern* context within Japan, given the constraints of Japanese civilization at the time. Especially, what we can call "positivist" or "critical empirical" assumptions in epistemology were almost unknown in the Edo period, as marked by the marginality of the (now) famous figure Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746).

The interpretation problem today is actually unprecedented because it is a side effect of modernization, a product of the self-protectiveness and identity-seeking which is inseparable from the modern intellectual history of Shin. When Shin crashed into the Meiji and Taishō periods, its old traditions rather suddenly became problematic in the new setting. Old were mythic assumptions that the sutra texts were the words of Śākyamuni, or that the Dharmakāra story involved a "concrete" figure (even if one located

sometime in the inconceivably distant past). In dealing with the classical texts, the schools retained an exegetical style from Edo (word by word analysis constructed entirely within the Buddhist discourse). Yet, at the same time, the old Buddhist sense of knowledge was interactive, interdependent, “soft” rather than “hard.” From Meiji onwards, however, the old Buddhist epistemology collided with nineteenth-century Western traditions which were (despite countervailing forces in the areas of creative imagination and literature) heavily influenced by positivism, critical empiricism, and objectivism. Against such revised intellectual conditions, and since imported Western thought suddenly acquired a universal claim to dominant authority, initially the Buddhists did not have any intellectual position from which to fight back and defend their own way of thinking, at a state before Heidegger or deconstruction, before narrative theory or cognitive psychology.

The Nishi Honganji and Higashi Honganji institutions diverged in somewhat different ways as they were forced to react. The approach of the Nishi branch—which was paradoxically enough the more progressive of the two outside of the intellectual realm and more international in its institutional involvements—was related to the Edo experience of the Sangōwakuran 三業惑乱 and to the Nonomura incident of the 1920s. In that incident, Nonomura Naotarō 野々村直太郎 (1870–1946), a professor at Ryukoku University, apparently responded to the modern intellectual pressure by going too far in the direction of concession to the positivist-empiricist critique: he overreacted to the point where he quite rejected the mythic tradition of Shin. Like many modern Shin thinkers, Nonomura was frustrated with the futurist orientation of much ordinary Shin faith, which was felt to displace the present too much, as well as being dissatisfied with non-scientific beliefs about the Pure Land which saw it as a quasi-concrete karmic transition zone. As Kigoshi has described, after a brief, chaotic but apparently institutionally-embarrassing public debate, Nishi Honganji acted by ejecting Nonomura from ministerial (and professorial) status (i.e., denying him any doctrinal authority) but without having at the same time really dealt with the intellectual problem raised.⁶² Essentially, Nishi backed away from the challenge, a quasi-official stance it has retained up to the present. The principle was conflict avoidance; the default tendency was to continue to work only *within* the frame of traditional discourse, although eventually a couple of limited cross-traditional hermeneutical modes also became somewhat accepted

⁶² Kigoshi 2009, Sasaki 1988. There is as yet no adequate published research in English on the Nonomura incident.

(such as the so-called Buddhist-Christian dialogue mentioned above or abstract comparative philosophy).

The Higashi branch, although also with the Nonomura incident in the background of its awareness from the mid-1920s onwards, took a different tack. It is not clear whether Higashi Buddhists had a *theoretical* counter-response available either to answer the challenge to the practice of their inherited *kyōgaku* 教学; in fact, at that theoretical level, they apparently have still not done much better than Nishi in allying themselves with post-positivist, post-objectivist theories of knowledge (in spite of the presence of the widely-informed minds of scholars like Yasutomi Shin'ya). However, the personal influence of Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) and the *seishin shugi* 精神主義 movement, and the educational tradition which emerged from it at Otani University in the twentieth century, encouraged strong personal existential encounter with texts. This has meant that generations of Otani students have *at least implicitly* participated in a tradition of personal mythic encounter, even if they have not abstracted or thematized it *as such* in terms of narrative or mythic or language theory. (The same phenomenon is certainly true for some Ryukoku students, even without the immediate presence of the *seishin shugi* lineage.) Thus, because of this overt emphasis on the personal intellectual encounter with Shinran, together with an emphasis on *certain kinds* of existential encounters with *certain parts* of the Western tradition, the outcome in Higashi has been a contemporary atmosphere that is at least somewhat more open, more hybrid, more personal, and less concerned with conflict avoidance than the Nishi side. There has also been more emphasis, via the English-language journal *The Eastern Buddhist*, on trans-Japanese intellectual engagement. On the other hand, it is often observed that in its own way, the Otani University tradition has fallen into a pattern of self-replication of the Kiyozawa tradition, which is now a hundred years old and has not been adequately updated.⁶³

The notion of Shin as “mythic” of course has appeared repeatedly in the English literature on Shin.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, in the overall picture, after a

⁶³ About reform in Otani, Conway suggests that the reform movement was rehabilitated not so much because of any technical resolution of philosophical disagreements, but because the Otani University professoriate and intellectual population were gradually replaced over time with reform sympathizers. Sometimes reform just means waiting the other side out. Kaneko's own positioning allowed this to happen, however, because unlike Nonomura, Kaneko kept himself within the discursive field of *kyōgaku* tradition (Conway 2009).

⁶⁴ Doherty 1979, Iwohara 2003, Bloom 1984, Gómez 2000.

hundred years, the intellectual question of how to handle Shin teaching as “myth” remains unresolved in the *Japanese* Shin Buddhist world. In a 2009 Kyoto meeting of the English-language International Association for Shin Buddhist Studies, Professor Kenneth Tanaka of Musashino University (but a Ph.D. graduate of religious studies at the University of California in North America) proposed understanding Shin language from a contemporary North American religious studies perspective on self-consciously conceived myth, but his position was resisted by Professor Naitō Chikō, a member of the *kangaku* 勧学 and defender of a highly restrictive, conservative conception of how to manage Shin doctrine based on the practical need of the membership for a story which might be naively accepted.⁶⁵ This conference reached a reasonably sophisticated level (although this fact would remain a mystery to anyone outside of Shin circles due to hermeneutical isolation, both social and intellectual) but striking again for a foreign observer was the extent to which the discussion was focused not on any audience—and especially not on any non-Japanese audience—but instead on Shin’s own closed world of *kyōgaku* discourse. (Accompanied, of course, by the persistent flavor of early twentieth-century controversies over theories of knowledge, due as is well known to the tenacity in Japan of nineteenth-century style German philosophy and religious thought.) To a neutral observer, it might seem that Buddhist studies in Japan has quite intentionally decided to put itself years behind Western religious studies in developing complex, interdisciplinary analyses of myth as applied to Buddhism.

Tanaka himself has bravely returned to this question repeatedly in his writings in English.⁶⁶ His most recent position adopts a complex attitude about the question of symbolism in Shin Buddhism, which is rooted in classical Mahayana thought, and he refers to several important Japanese Buddhist thinkers who have taken up the problem. However, the framing of the question remains Japanocentric and absorbed in inward-facing apologetics and interpretations for classical Shin doctrinal language. Although Tanaka’s work does mention some standard twentieth-century religious thinkers (Tillich, Eliade, Campbell), otherwise there is hardly any reference to non-Shin

⁶⁵ Even some Western scholars have argued against any conceptual translation whatsoever, maintaining for example that the Amida story should not be interpreted even in terms of Buddhism’s own *śūnyatā* theory (Keenan 2001). More simplistically than Keenan’s view, of course, a literalist fundamentalism about the Shin mythos is not unknown in the English-speaking world.

⁶⁶ Tanaka 2009a, Tanaka 2009b, Tanaka 1992, Tanaka 1987.

or non-Buddhist discursive worlds; indeed, it is hard to tell that the Shin scholars are actually living in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Almost nothing suggests heuristic distancing from the Shin discourse and its historical conditions of exclusivist privileging. Meanwhile, as Tanaka himself explains, on the basis of his own direct research, the basic controversy is meaningless to educated North Americans, who all *easily* assume that the “Pure Land” is a kind of symbolic language for the supreme truth of emptiness and (for them at least) does not in any way refer to a concrete place which is “out there.” The neutral observer from outer space—at least one who might have landed in California—might well scratch his helmet and wonder, “Why are these creatures still talking about that?”

Against this Japanese-facing background, today there are a few, but only a few, places where the reader from Walden Pond could find interesting discussions about how Shin language interacts with myth analysis. One is the English-language journal *The Pure Land*, where relevant articles occasionally appear. Another is a collection edited by Dennis Hirota entitled *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*.⁶⁷ Yet the interaction with the wide world of myth theory in that book is limited too. Despite the authors’ aim to overcome traditional limitations, the inquiry is still framed in a quite sectarian way, chiefly follows the lines of the Japanese university religious/philosophical discourse, and as the editor himself noted in his afterword, did not result in any kind of new discursive synthesis for the presentation of Shin Buddhism.

More imaginative, even interdisciplinary presentations of Shin are not completely unknown, even in Japan. Professor Yasutomi Shin’ya of Otani University has been one such person. Willing to speak openly of symbolism and metaphor, Yasutomi has discussed, in the context of Shinshū’s text reading traditions, how from a Buddhist point of view flexibility of language should not be a problem. Buddhism aims to avoid attachment to language; words are only a finger pointing at the moon. Language is a symbol of truths that go beyond words. The Pure Land is an “image” for the nature of enlightenment. Sutras are metaphorical in ways that contrast with language-based fundamentalism.⁶⁸

Ōmine Akira, emeritus of Ryukoku University, has been another, a scholar who started with German philosophy and was willing to discuss Shinran in

⁶⁷ Hirota 2000.

⁶⁸ Yasutomi 2004, especially pp. 29–58.

the context of a wide, even global network of religious, literary, linguistic and philosophical references. (Although this does not mean that a Japanese style like Ōmine's necessarily translates well for a Western audience: his work has a heavy dose of nineteenth-century German thought, which leads to confusion between Buddhist and quasi-Christian intellectual frameworks and leaves the impression that Japanese scholars have trouble separating the psychological interiority of Western thought from its background assumptions rooted in Christianity.) Nevertheless a writer like Ōmine is willing to mention symbolism, to convey a sense of universal existential problems, and to go far beyond the usual constraints of Shin talk.⁶⁹

Yet much different, and perhaps the most interesting effort to date in genuinely mediating Shin Buddhism to truly general American audiences, is the kind of writing offered by the American professor Taitetsu Unno. In his *River of Fire, River of Water*,⁷⁰ for example, while Unno certainly demonstrates a sectarian agenda, and definitely wants to inculcate a mythopoetic religious perspective in his readers, nevertheless his method is to fill his teaching with a wealth of literary, philosophical, psychological and even scientific references *which effectively communicate with a broad swath of educated Americans. Unno knows his territory.* The outcome is a relatively demystified, accessible image of Shin, clarifying how it relates to monastic Buddhism, and hardly shaped at all by ties or references to Christianity. The result is a completely different kind of "contemporary understanding" than that experimented with in the Hirota volume by that name.

Still, to a naïve, neutral observer from outer space, the overall intellectual situation might seem profoundly paradoxical. In principle, any kind of Mahayana Buddhism should manifest itself in intellectually flexible, adaptive, responsive religious languages. But this is not the case. Unexpectedly, one can see in modern Western *Christian* thinking a greater degree of intellectual flexibility, adaptiveness, and responsiveness. In particular, one of the intellectual puzzles on the Japanese side is that modern Japanese academia (not to mention much middlebrow publishing as well) is crammed with accessible information about linguistics, hermeneutics, philosophy, psychology, and so on which is drawn from what can now be quite reasonably called the "world" intellectual idea-bank relating to such topics. In Japanese literature in religious contexts too any database search will show

⁶⁹ See, for example, Ōmine 1986; but almost nothing of Ōmine's writing is translated into English.

⁷⁰ Unno 1998a.

that the ideas of myth and symbolism come up in connection with Shinto, the emperor system, *mikkyō* 密教 Buddhism, Indian religions, Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich, religious ritual, religious architecture, Carl Jung and folk religious studies, or shamanism. Therefore, by now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has become clear that the hesitancy to talk about myth is a *Shin Buddhist* problem, not a Japanese intellectual problem in general. Is it because Japanese religious institutions are among the last holdouts of Meiji-style identity-seeking?

A final aspect of this situation is that while Japanese Shin scholars have long been interested in abstract dreams of universal Mahayana, they have in practice been much less interested in the concrete, dynamic realities of Buddhism in the United States. As Ama notes,⁷¹ while American scholars addressing Buddhism in America have rapidly grown familiar with new concepts such as transnational or translocative Buddhism, the Japanese side has for the most part ignored the contextual factors of American Buddhism (the sociological literature about which is almost unknown in Japan) or stuck to older perspectives on “Asian identity.” A 1990s dual-language work on “Shinran and America” was entirely Honganji-BCA-ethnic-oriented, addressing the audience through the boilerplate clichés of Japanese-oriented Shin Buddhist modernism. The editor Takeda was concerned with the relationship of Buddhism and modern religious pluralism, but this was a Japanese intellectual problem, not an American one.⁷²

At the moment, no one can show, from the standpoint of the Concordites, that even Shin modernism *à la Japonaise* has been significantly more communicative than Shin conservatism. Whatever happened to a broad concept of *hōben* 方便? Shin dictionaries explain that treatments of *hōben* in the Shin context almost entirely revolve around specialized discussions of Shinran’s *kesshindo* 化身土 (“Transformed Land”) chapter in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証. And yet profound ideas of *hōben*, including *hōben hosshin* 方便法身, seem to have been an ordinary background assumption for Edo and earlier Mahayana Buddhist thinkers, so much so that this aspect of doctrine did not need to receive a particularly high level of doctrinal attention

⁷¹ Ama 2007, p. 10.

⁷² Takeda 1996. Among the writers in the volume, Tsuji Kenryū showed the most sensitivity to reality when he applied the term “platitudes” (p. 240). This is another case where Japanese scholars ended up adopting European ideas of “static” Buddhism: “Buddhist studies tends to replicate the practices, tropes, and conceits located in Buddhist texts and institutions, where Buddhism is represented as a self-identical dharma that has moved from one Asian culture to another, unchanged through the vicissitudes of time” (Lopez 1995, p. 8).

from Edo Shin thinkers. Would it not seem that the idea of *hōben* is intimately related to mythicity as a comprehensive epistemological principle, as a fundamental means of human communication? And yet, for almost a century no widely significant effort has been made in Japanese Buddhism to develop *hōben* theory in such a way as to link it up powerfully with the later global trends in post-positivist, post-objectivist theories of knowledge and narrative (such as those surveyed by scholars like William Doty; see below). Are not communication and access exactly the point of *hōben*? As Ueyama has pointed out as part of his call for a new kind of hermeneutical evolution in Shin Buddhism, traditional Buddhism has commonly esteemed *hōben* as much as or more than the ultimate truth itself. In this light, to criticize modern forms of *hōben* as somehow unacceptable or “reductionist,” when compared to the classical legitimacy language, seems entirely unconvincing.

Perhaps, to paraphrase George Orwell, all *hōbens* are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Shin’s stubborn sense of itself as a unique privileged language also brings Concordites up against what might be called the “simplicity paradox” in Shin Buddhism, a paradox which is embedded in Shinran himself. On the one hand, a core Shin claim about the experience of *shin* 信 or “entrusting to Buddha,” according to the *Tannishō* 嘆異抄, is that *shin* must be fundamentally natural and spontaneous, a universal hope available to all human beings regardless of wealth, status, *education*, or even karmic history. On the other hand, according to the tradition seen in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran needed to confront a difficult problem of establishing some kind of interpretory textual legitimation for his religious language. For the Shin intellectual elite, Shinran’s solution was splendid, incomparable, even transcendental. Yet there is a gap: historically most of the actual ordinary members of Shin Buddhism have never extensively understood, or therefore been particularly attached to, the whole intricate legitimacy logic of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. Additionally, to the foreign outsider, however, it seems that if the experience is really basically natural and simple, it *at least* should be possible to describe it in *one or more other ways* besides with the classical literature of legitimation. This of course does *not* mean substituting or replacing or rejecting the classical language, but rather supplementing, complementing and enriching that language. So, for example, in this context a psychological (supplementary, complementary) description should not be considered “reductionist” in a negative way. The fact that the expe-

riential issues in Buddhism are subtle and in some sense transrational does not mean they cannot be talked about, tentatively, to encourage accessibility, via a whole variety of methods. Indeed, if some plurality of explanations is not permitted, the significance/import of Shin can end up not as a hopeful claim about a widely potential religious experience, but as the superficial *total equation* of “Shin Buddhism” to a *particular form of religious language alone*. Then, the message of Shin becomes inseparable from a specific, unique, *Honganji-patented* mode of textual and linguistic expression, even in the so-called modernist setting. Is this what *tariki hongan* 他力本願 is supposed to be about? In the end it seems that Shin “interpretation” (*hōben*) takes the form either of Tokugawa conservatism, or a Shin Buddhist modernism which has (*pace* Al Bloom and Taitetsu Unno) been created and adapted essentially for a *Japanese* audience but certainly not a larger global audience.

Back to Walden Pond

But what is the Walden relationship to all this? Can it not be at some point permissible to declare explicitly that this complex, shadowy, often unreflective battle over ethnic self-consciousness and Japanese identity-seeking is meaningless nonsense for the good people of Concord? To the Concordites, it might easily seem that the Japanese Shin Buddhists are like the proverbial frogs in the well. Not only that, these particular frogs not only forgot to bring ladders with them, but they brought shovels so they could dig deeper.

Obviously, from the standpoint of the Concordites, some improved approach is needed. When Shin was modernizing from the early twentieth century as discussed above, it was trying to solve *Japanese* issues: Japan inherited Buddhist traditions and the Japanese challenge was to connect them to Western thought. For Walden, however, the direction of the “docking maneuver” is just the opposite: the West has inherited Western traditions and the challenge is to connect *them* to Buddhist thought. The premises *must* be different on each side. The modern Japanese intellectual unfolding—even on the relatively progressive Higashi Honganji side—has not resulted in a discourse that “talks” to any significant number of educated foreign people or suits their needs. And as tangentially noted above, even *in Japan* today, one can question whether contemporary Shin language, when there is much more global intellectual exchange than in the past, has

achieved an adequate ongoing process or program of dynamic intellectual hybridity which suits the needs of *Japanese*. Perhaps the problem is not that the good people of Walden are not sharp-witted enough to catch more of the meanings of Shin Buddhism; rather, suppose the core difficulty for Walden Americans, for the non-*nikkei* Concordites, for these members of the Three Hundred Million, for these educated (and not necessarily red-white-and-blue egomaniac) East Coasters, lies with the majority of English-language mediators/apologists who have tried to expose Shin Buddhism to the non-Japanese world, and have simply not yet succeeded in cutting through ethnic barriers to capture and interpret sufficiently what the core of the tradition is interestingly about.⁷³

So this is the core question: what is there about Shin Buddhism, *if anything*, that would, *if it were correctly understood*, crucially appeal to those people in Concord?⁷⁴ What might actually work for the purpose of solidly appealing to the audience on the shore of Walden Pond? The presentation of Pure Land as a closed-language system, as an encryption, does not work at all. Interpretation/mediation in terms of broader Mahayana thought makes Shin much more understandable to the Concordians who *already know something* about Buddhism, just as is the case with contemporary people even in Japan; the question here for them then is what makes Shin crucially *distinctive*. Interpretation/mediation in terms of modern philosophy of religion is abstract, intellectual, and not particularly compelling; again the question is what makes Shin crucially *distinctive*. Interpretation/mediation in terms of Shinran's interesting life and Shin's benevolent, relatively progressive social attitudes is attractive enough, however, the general ethical and political orientations involved are quite familiar to these liberal Concordians, and it would be hard to persuade them that there was anything of special interest in Shin. (Alfred Bloom has referred to Shin as a peak of liberal religion, but Walden *already has* liberal religion. . . .) Perhaps some *combination* of the above would grab the interest of the Concordians.

⁷³ Let me make it explicit that this is not criticism of Japanese-American experience: its effort, or its suffering, or its indeed rather extraordinary success in terms of creating an established religious institution in the United States against massive obstacles. Those accomplishments have been duly and correctly celebrated at many times and places. The point here is just that from the standpoint of making accessible to the larger American population the ideas and principles of Shin Buddhism, the Japanese-American experience has been a failure, maybe even counterproductive.

⁷⁴ Compare the following treatment to, e.g., Habito 2009.

Yet something else is needed too. There has to be an energetic positive thrust about Shin which persuades Concordites that there is something truly interesting about it which is also truly global and truly independent of the struggle over ethnicity. What does Walden need? Three points are suggested. There *must be* interpretation/mediation consciously in terms of mythic/narrative/poetic religious studies analysis, because myth, narrative and poetry are the most natural contact point inasmuch as these ways of understanding are well-developed in the minds of the Concordians. There *must be* an adequate historical explanation for Shin. Finally, the above explanations *must lead* to interpretation/mediation in terms of modern psychological understandings.

MAKING EXPLICIT THE MYTHIC QUALITY OF SHIN

The decisive matter in Shin is not philosophy or abstract theories of knowledge, but story or mythopoetics. This being the case, a necessary first step is that Shin doctrine has to be understood and explained self-consciously as mythic/narrative/poetic form. There is an *enormous* amount of Western study of myth which provides expanded ways to think about Shin teaching along such lines.⁷⁵ As a single example, one useful guide to this mass of material is William Doty's *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*.⁷⁶ There is no space for going far into the complexities of this big book, but one can emphasize two major points: The definition of myth in modern humanities is extremely sophisticated. This is Doty's:

A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important, (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind's roles and relative statuses within it.

⁷⁵ Gómez 2000 shows that a sophisticated religious studies analysis of myth is a perfectly obvious move for studies of Pure Land. The main problem (as in other kinds of Japanese humanities) is that the approach from the Japanese side is generally not *au courant* with Western humanities theory (e.g., Iwohara 2003). When it is mishandled, Shin mythos comes across as being anti-intellectual or opaque.

⁷⁶ Doty 2000.

Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of supra-human entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes (mythic units) having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.⁷⁷

Human beings universally organize almost *all* their experience by narrative thinking, by storytelling. The cultures of even modern “scientific” and technological societies are crammed full of mythic messages and programming. A key insight, then, is that science and myth are not necessarily clearly distinguishable. In spite of the apparent dominance of science as an interpretive style, there is enormous overlap between science and myth.

Reinventing Shin as Part of World History

A global-level, “big picture” interpretation for Shin could be achieved by referring to the well-developed European historiographical discourse on the public-private problem. This approach would be based on works such as Ariès and Duby 1987–1999 (including Chartier 1989), McKeon 2005, or Weintraub 1997.⁷⁸ Like contemporary myth studies, this topic goes far

⁷⁷ Doty 2000, pp. 33–34. The rest of the book analyzes all of these subjects in detail.

⁷⁸ See also Watt 2006, a set of articles selected to illustrate the recent emphasis of European Reformation studies on the Reformation as a very long-term process of persuasion and indoctrination which actually went on for centuries after the initial conflicts. The intellectual problem here seems obvious: the development of modern Japanese historical thought (especially thought about religion) has shut out an important slice of ideas from contemporary European method. (The public-private discourse has appeared in the English-language literature about Japan, i.e., Berry 1986.) Although a good number of Japanese scholars were interested in political theory and of course in Marxism through the twentieth century, the “private life” or “public-private” discourse seems to be little exploited in Japan; major works by Ariès and Duby or by Habermas have not been translated into Japanese and are practically unknown except perhaps among historians of Europe. The idea of gradually emergent individuation is a basic assumption of Shin modernism and its (often ahistorical) studies of Shinran the founder, but otherwise disappears from inquiries into pre-Meiji Japanese religion. Historians who have constructed a narrative of Japanese religious history have ignored these

beyond the bounds of this article, but a few points can be indicated from McKeon and *A History of Private Life*. The lines of inquiry set up by the “private life” question are concerned with the history of differentiation in society and consciousness, especially individuation. The approach is multidisciplinary, covering fields ranging from political theory to religion to printing to literature. A key marker of the arrival of greater public-private differentiation is the expansion of print and publication, the “increasingly private devolution” of information. In general, “private life” questions are not about political theory or governance; they are questions about domestic housing design, codes of personal behavior, education of children, clothing, refuges of intimacy such as gardens, gift exchanges, property and property rights, male-female relations, marriage, sexuality, parent-child relations, family relations, childhood, canons of aesthetic taste including food, crime, festival life, literature and its practices (diaries, family records), friendship, neighborhood, kinship, sensibility about the body, voluntary associations, death ritual, and above all conceptions of selfhood.⁷⁹ The question involves subtle understanding of what is meant when new language concepts come into use. The appearance of a *language* identifying distinct conceptual fields, such as public and private, indicates that differentiation in the concrete world is actually highly advanced (when the implicit becomes explicit, the implicit is already well-developed, since abstraction only becomes possible when a plethora of differentiated cases is available). Taking European history as an example, it is obvious that certain thinkers can *anticipate* developments that will take very long periods of time to fully manifest themselves (e.g., Aristotle’s ideas on politics, or Augustine on personal interiority in Christianity). In the area of religion, a “protestant separation” was a central aspect of this increasing differentiation. The Reformation promoted “secularization” by the “explicitation” which purified religion by

wider, more abstract (sociological, systems theory) implications of the idea of a “protestant” religiosity existing in Japan. The oddity of overlooking a complex, nuanced “*longue durée* modernization narrative” in the case of Shin, or indeed any kind of Buddhism, is that it is so obvious to Western historians and sociologists. Tamney (2008) followed standard sociological and historical theory when he noted that individuation is characteristic of modernity along with other types of differentiation. Tamney’s (rather standard) sociological perspective hints that much discussion of Buddhist adaptation in the United States is unclear just because the real issues are not so much ethnicity as simply modernization among immigrant groups which started from a different sociological position.

⁷⁹ See, within Ariès and Duby 1987–91 overall, e.g., Castan 1989 or Ranum 1989.

separating it out from its cultural matrix, and by gradually focusing on the individual as clan patriarchy was undermined.⁸⁰

It must be stressed that the approach is not a simplistic evolutionary or modernization theory, especially of a linear type.⁸¹ The question aims to reveal carefully qualified, gradual, multidimensional processes which extend over long periods of time. Nor should the “history of private life” be confused with the “constitution of the individual as subject” in any strict philosophical, political or psychological sense⁸² or any caricature of individualism. In the context of religion, the “private” is not about theology, it is about complexity. The “protestant” shift, to the extent that we can speak of one, is not to any crude “individualism” so much as a gradual, long-term movement in sensitive balances between a single self and community, complex transitions of explicitness in the dialectical formation of the spheres of state and local, individual and communal, or household and village. And in fact it is difficult to handle the “history of differentiation” even in the intensely studied context of European history.⁸³

It also must be emphasized that while the private-life approach gives a basis for cross-cultural comparison, of course the working out of the details of the principle of differentiation and public-private separation was significantly different in Japan than in Europe. Certain themes seem to be similar between Japan and Europe: “protestant separation” in religion; print culture; complex interplay between communal and individual dimensions of religious life; ambiguity in patriarchal family organization; emergence of private property and differentiating effects of elaborated market economies. On the other hand numerous other themes were different: discourses on politics (this was hugely different in Europe, such that the absence of *explicit* democratizing theory in Japan before Meiji has been vastly misleading); discourses on women and sexuality (much less obsessive in Japan); the specifics of literary genres, especially the novel (again, the narration of private life had a much more prominent literary history in Europe); or *overt* discourse of selfhood (goes without saying in a Buddhist country . . .).

What is proposed here, however, is that Shin Buddhism actually seems to be baffling to some not because its theory of knowledge is Christian,

⁸⁰ McKeon 2005, pp. 33–39, 54, Yves Castan 1989 discusses the rebalanced private-communal relationship in European Christianity after the Reformation.

⁸¹ Ariès 1989, p. 2.

⁸² Chartier 1989, p. 165.

⁸³ McKeon 2005, Weintraub 1997.

but rather because its implicit assumptions about psychological complexity departed from other, earlier kinds of Buddhism and were partly parallel to developments particularly in the Euro-American sphere. How could this be misunderstood? Merely because it has not been expected in the case of Asian Buddhism. Yet, in principle, the operation of Buddhist teaching in a highly complex, differentiated, “modernizing” or “protomodernizing” society has to be different from its operation in early Indian tribal society, or a southeast Asian caste society, or a Chinese Confucian society, no matter what abstract theories of Buddhist philosophical interdependence may exist in the background. The bottom line for Waldenites is that the developmental patterns of Shin Buddhism can be approached according to certain global perspectives in socio-political history. The historical key to Shin is long-term cognitive change in human civilizational evolution.

Reinventing Shin as Modern Psychology

While such an enhanced explanation of Shin in Japanese history—focusing on the idea of increasing systemic differentiation, marked by elaborations in concepts and practices of public and private which have implications in all spheres of life—may have impact among professional comparative historians, and serve as a better intellectual foundation for them, that kind of history is still obviously too abstract and theoretical for even the people around Walden Pond. Therefore, what needs to be elaborated is the domain where Concordites are most directly engaged. This is the domain of inner moral, emotional, spiritual experience: in short a contemporary psychological understanding. The challenge here, which follows upon the recognition of Shin teaching as something historically innovative, is to show that the tradition is *about something crucially interesting*, which has to be identified and clarified in the strongest, most pungent manner, without being trapped in the box of Japanese-identity assumptions. Thus, Shin teaching must be mediated in terms of a *psychological narrative about the emergence of a more complex level—of near-modern consciousness—in a civilization which inherited Buddhism and thus adapted that emergence and Buddhism together*. The most powerful way to present Shin Buddhism is not through Shinran’s “personal experience” but rather in terms of a whole cultural shift, the beginning of a turn in the history of consciousness in Asia.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ For the long version of this argument, see Amstutz 2009.

Fundamentally, the approach should be based in the view of the cognitive unconscious which has become normative in modern psychology. Psychologists today think that the overwhelming majority of brain activities occur autonomously and outside of normal conscious awareness. The cognitive unconscious then contains a whole other “self” which is relatively independent of the conscious self. Some psychologists argue that even the notion linking “conscious willing” to “voluntary actions” is a kind of illusion. Instead, intention and action are caused by mental processes that are formed separately from “will”; will instead is a secondary interpretation which creates fictive “authorship” for intention and action. Obviously, this perspective aligns with the involuntary nature of *shin* or “deep entrusting.” (This approach focuses attention on how conventional or classic Buddhist thought was surprisingly limited in its recognition of anything resembling the [inaccessible] cognitive subconscious, and how “meditation” is more limited in its effects than Buddhist apologists [especially Western-oriented ones] have claimed.) From the religious studies viewpoint, a phenomenon which can be called “involuntary surrender” is extremely important in religiosity generally.

Thus, we can talk heuristically about something called “evolved interiority,” which involves a developmental record of increasingly rich human experience of consciousness linked to increasingly elaborated socio-political environments which yield more and more complexity “inside” the theater of individual minds. As thinkers such as Walter Ong have suggested, this interiority is likely related to the development of literacy over time. Actually, the notion of a special “interiority” at the heart of Shinran’s teaching—no matter how well or poorly it was actually implemented in the historical teaching of the Shin institution—is a commonplace in the discussion of Shin, although typically it has not been associated with any historical process.⁸⁵

Shinran was a pioneer of evolved interiority in Buddhist and Asian history. His contribution was to concentrate awareness in a newly-coherent manner on the unconscious principle in Buddhist transformation, and thus to stimulate the formation of a new type of Buddhist discourse which logically aligned the psychology, the language, and (with the establishment of Honganji) the institutional claims. Shinran’s thought enabled a combination of “complexity” elements which was practically unique for some seven or eight hundred years, until the current twentieth- and twenty-first

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Unno 1990, but he does not place the ideas in any historical context.

century phase of Buddhist development, in which through the recapitulation mentioned earlier Shin-like ideas and institutions are being reinvented as part of American Buddhism. Such elements include: a shift to (ultimate) involuntariness psychology; delegitimation of the conventional institutional model (based in *vinaya*); a template of spiritually egalitarian community; an increase in subjective selfhood and a certain “political” autonomy of the individual along with the religious institution; a rethinking and reinterpretation of the traditional canon, in a manner accomplished via literacy; a simplification and internalization of symbolic representation and communication; a marginalization of “supernormal” experience; and a mythic equalization of the spiritual potential of people via an understanding of a shared, unmanipulated trans-self transformational “power.”

A Personal Caveat: From the Perspective of Walden Pond are There Really Future Prospects for a Shin-type Buddhism Actually Directly Based on the Japanese Tradition?

This article is entitled “Kiyozawa in Concord” to gesture towards what needs to be done: in the same way that Kiyozawa and his generation of students and thinkers in early twentieth-century Japan made Western ideas speak somehow passionately to modern Japanese Buddhists, one kind of Shin Buddhist project must be to make Shin Buddhist ideas speak somehow passionately to Concordites. And yet, serious changes in interpretive orientation are not something that persons—Japanese people, Japanese-Americans, or even the relative handful of White (or Hispanic or Chinese) Americans who have been incorporated in the system—who have a stake in the dominant story of Shin as somehow “ethnic” will probably have any interest in undertaking.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, to whatever extent the presentation of any kind of Buddhism is influenced by a modern grasping after self-identity, to that same extent it is fraudulent. A great irony of the overlooking of Shin in general American culture that has accompanied this convoluted situation is that while modern Japanese-ethnic Shin Buddhists have definitely wanted respect and recognition from the outside world, exactly to the same degree that they actually concentrate only on their own identity-seeking and internal audience they undercut and delegitimize the larger world’s perception of them. Proverbially, sometimes nothing succeeds like failure; or is it the other way around?

⁸⁶ By 1999, Charles Prebish had concluded that the Buddhist Churches of America was just fine as it was (Prebish 1999, p. 138). Compare to n. 1 in this article.

Where does this leave us? Without any conclusion, only process. Let me conclude by once again emphasizing, this time quite personally, my own relationship with Walden Pond. Over the course of some forty-five years of my life, ever since I was twelve years old and on a family trip from California to Massachusetts, I have sporadically found myself dropping by Walden Pond and sitting on the shore pondering the flow of things. And here is my puzzle: can I really successfully connect my forty-five years of Walden with my thirty years of engagement with Shin Buddhism in Japan? Have the many years of labor required to tangle with this alien language, this unfamiliar history, this painful encryption, this unceasing insecurity and identity-seeking on the part of Japanese people, really been worth the effort? As an American intellectual who has been involved with Shin tradition for much of my adult life, I have experienced continual frustration. To be involved with Shin over a period of time yields the sensation of being trapped in a muddy no-man's land (intellectual and sometimes existential) where the White army to the West builds its trenches according to one kind of bad faith, and the Yellow army to the East digs its bunkers according to a different kind of bad faith. Let me state it in a radical way that will astonish most Japanese Shin Buddhists. From a Walden kind of foreigners' point of view, religious understanding via the Shin tradition is almost held *hostage* by a semi-poisoned modern Japanese identity crisis that is just too unnecessarily difficult to deal with. Hyperbole? In any case I do not think any imprisonment is what Shinran had in mind.

What a waste! At the beginning of the twentieth century, no other civilization seemed to offer more potential for East-West hybridization than Japan. May I conclude by borrowing a couple of metaphors from the internationalized game of baseball? Cannot Japanese thinkers on Shin Buddhism have the postmodernist ability to "switch hit" among mythopoetic narratives (perhaps of several kinds), scientific narratives (perhaps of several kinds)—or even among identity narratives? Since Japanese baseball players have recently proven they could become world champions, why could not Japanese Buddhist scholars have become by now a kind of genuine world champions in religious studies? And why is it that when a foreign scholar like me works with the Japanese Buddhist "teams," he often feels, although we are all supposed to be playing the same game, that we are actually on different teams, with different fields, and even using different balls?

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