

A View from the Margins: Translating from a Japanese Religious Tradition

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I will touch on several issues related to the translation of the writings of Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), in which I was involved for a number of years.¹ The conscious aim of the translation work, at least for myself, was twofold: to produce a precise version of Shinran's writings that would, through contact with current modes of thought and religious traditions in the world, lead to a reinterpretation of Shinran, one that would illuminate the contribution that his thought might make to our contemporary situation; and secondly, through eliciting responses to Shinran's writings from abroad, to stimulate changes in the Shin Buddhist (Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗) temple institution and its presentation of the teaching in Japan.

If "observing Japan from within" is distinct from "observing Japan from without," perhaps the difference might be taken as having not to do with geographical location at all but rather with the possibility of assuming a stance in which, at times, there come into play the question of the significance of the Japanese experience for the contemporary world, including the West, and the hope of altering or developing the cultural tradition that is the object of research. If disinterested views from nowhere are no longer recognized and the viewer no longer presumed invisible, perhaps the visions from within and without should be characterized by self-reflection.

The Shinran translation project in which I participated as head translator, completed in 1997, has shown little sign yet of achieving the aims stated above. Here, I will consider two factors in this result. One is an institutional source of conservatism within the temple system, including its

¹ See Hirota et al. 1997.

branches abroad; the second is the perception of Shin Buddhist tradition in the West.² There are also of course more fundamental difficulties having more directly to do with religious understanding, but the two I touch on here may be more easily open to remedy.

Temple System as Guild

There are two interrelated and exceedingly distinctive facets of the Shin Buddhist temple system that contribute to its bureaucratic cohesion and also to an inherent *institutional* conservatism in doctrine and practices. Remarkably, despite their distinctiveness, until quite recently Western researchers have little noted the significance of these institutional characteristics, and they are little studied in Japan. One is the practice of hereditary succession to the office of head abbot (*monshu* 門主 or *hossu* 法主). The present abbots of both the Nishi Honganji 西本願寺 and Higashi Honganji 東本願寺 temple systems stand in unbroken lineages of blood descent, spanning more than twenty generations, from the founder Shinran. This hereditary succession reflects social practices deeply ingrained in Japanese culture, and analogies may be seen, in both the mechanism of succession and the sentiments of allegiance felt among the membership, in the emperor system and, to a lesser extent, the *iemoto* 家元 system in schools of traditional arts.

It is not that the abbots are necessarily personally conservative in outlook. Today, their roles are largely ceremonial, although they possess significant charisma through their offices and lineage. The office of abbot itself, however, functions to undergird and legitimize the hierarchical and hereditary dimensions of the entire temple structure. This is the second and more consequential conservative force inherent in the temple system. The Nishi and Higashi Honganji temple organizations each consist of approximately ten thousand local temples that serve parishioners in their neighborhoods. The office of resident minister in these temples is, like the office of Honganji abbot, commonly passed on by hereditary succession

² This paper brings together thoughts on issues I have taken up independently elsewhere. See Hirota 2000 for a fuller discussion and also Hirota 2001 for a consideration of two recent readings of Shinran by Western scholars.

from father to son, this normally being also the will of the parishioners. Since ministers marry and raise their families in the temples, the temples function in fact as ancestral homes, frequently occupied by three generations of a family that has resided in the temple for hundreds of years and many generations.

The hereditary succession to temple priesthood is surely startling (and, in cases, repulsive) to non-Japanese Buddhists accustomed to associating priestly endeavor with the renunciation of householding life and adherence to precepts of nonattachment, but in addition, this custom might be said to be distinctive from the perspective of practices among world religions. This is because it is not simply a matter of sons (or, under certain circumstances, daughters) of ministers often themselves following in their fathers' footsteps. Rather, it involves in essence family ownership of temples and proprietary control of local religious life, including funeral and memorial services and in many cases even caretaking of ancestral graves on temple property. Thus, it is not unheard of for bitter family disputes to arise over matters of succession, for while some temples in depopulating areas must struggle for survival, many in fact provide not only spacious residences, social status in the local community, lucrative incomes, and lifetime security, but may also be maintained while holding other regular employment, including academic positions.

The adoption of the social custom of hereditary succession into Shin temple institutional practice was made possible by Shinran's public assumption, revolutionary at the time for a cleric, of married life. By thoroughly rejecting the salvific significance of monastic and lay precepts, including those of celibacy, and openly and formally marrying while continuing to wear priest's robes and perform priestly functions, he drew the logical conclusion of Hōnen's 法然 nembutsu 念仏 teaching. That is, persons are saved solely through the utterance of the nembutsu out of authentic entrusting of themselves to the working of wisdom-compassion, and not by any personal accomplishment of practice, including observance of monk's precepts. Actual marriage and the raising of a family was a step that Hōnen did not himself undertake, and it represented, in the example of his disciple Shinran, a radical and decisive departure from the monastic ideal officially upheld throughout the entire preceding history of Buddhist

tradition on the Asian continent and in Japan. Although at present it is common for monks of almost all schools and denominations of Buddhism in Japan to marry, apart from the Shin tradition, this practice of legal and public recognition of the marriage of priests goes back only to the Meiji period and to the efforts of the Meiji state to weaken the power and authority of Buddhist temple institutions.

It must be noted, however, that hereditary succession to the leadership of the Shin movement was not instituted by Shinran himself, but developed by his descendents after his death. In fact, the Honganji temple was not established by Shinran, but grew out of a mausoleum built for him by his daughter. Shinran spent most of his years of active propagation in the Kantō area, but, at about the age of sixty-three, left the followings that had gathered in the different areas in the hands of close disciples and returned to Kyoto. He devoted the remaining three decades of his long life to his writings, living in virtual anonymity in the capital, and the domination of the movement he had nurtured in Kantō by his blood descendents and the Honganji temple developed slowly over several generations.

At present, in addition to hereditary succession, the temple system is sustained by practices of intermarriage among temple families within the system. Thus, not only are relationships with parishioners maintained over generations, sustained by the need for funeral services, memorial services for past generations of ancestors, and care of the ancestral graves that are often located in temple graveyards and mausoleums, but relationships within the temple system are also close-knit, supported by intermarriage and other associations within the temple administrative, educational, and propagational infrastructures. Our concern here is not a sociological analysis of this temple system, but the consequences it has tended to have regarding doctrinal issues, notably in two areas, namely the nature of religious realization and its social implications.

Concerning the former, we may note that within the temple system, there is what might be called a “vocational” (in a secular rather than religious sense) conception of the role of priest and of the qualifications for temple ministry for those born within the system. In other words, minimal levels of study, much of it focused on rituals and ceremonies, are regarded as adequate for temple work, and it is not uncommon for temple offspring

without strong religious motivation to succeed to the office of resident minister out of family and parishioner expectation and social custom. Within such a system, it is perhaps not surprising that interpretations of what Shinran terms “realization of *shinjin* 信心” should tend toward doctrinally abstract and nonexperiential formulations, and that, particularly on an academic level, resistance should arise concerning any understanding of the core of the religious path as entailing qualities of awareness or experience regarded as departing from the social norm.

A similar inclination toward the affirmation of existing conditions is seen in considerations of moral conduct or values that might spawn a critical attitude toward the prevailing social practices into which the temple system is interwoven. The close interconnections of academic Shin studies and temple bureaucracy, both rooted in the hereditary temple system, make it difficult to develop self-reflective critical thought on a corporate level within a theological framework. This may be appreciated when it is recognized that relations of persons within the temple system extend not only back through the generations of a person’s own ancestors, but also forward to the next generations of children and grandchildren. Further, they also branch out ‘horizontally’ through extensive intermarriage within the system.

The Tokugawa-period heritage of the hierarchical temple system controlled by bureaucracies responsible for maintaining orthodoxy both in teachings and in practices, coupled with hereditary succession of the office of abbot of the Honganji and of resident priest in the local temples, has made for great stability in the institution, which may otherwise have fragmented. At the same time, it has nurtured a deeply entrenched doctrinal traditionalism. It is not that the institution itself has failed to take conscientious stands, for example with regard to widespread social discrimination, the worship by public officials at the Yasukuni 靖国 shrine, and such abusive practices common in other Buddhist temples as exorbitant fees for mortuary services. It is also not to deny that Shin temples have produced farsighted and creative thinkers and leaders in all fields of society. Nevertheless, on an institutional level, a conservatism aimed at self-preservation has often been prevalent. In view of the revolutionary nature of Shinran’s reinterpretation of the Buddhist tradition, his

extraordinary personal break with the customary socio-religious practices of his times, and his astringent criticism of the wrongdoing of both the established temples and the imperial court, it appears that a revitalization of the Shin tradition may necessarily entail far-reaching efforts to envision anew the character of both personal and corporate religious life.

The Western Bifurcation of Shin Buddhist Tradition

There is little need to make the case that the Shin Buddhist tradition, one of the largest Buddhist movements in the world today, with a history of nearly eight centuries of doctrinal development, has received disproportionately little attention from Western researchers. The disparity between the prominent role Shin Buddhism has played in Japanese society and its relative neglect by Western scholars has frequently been remarked upon.³ In addition, there is widespread agreement among most commentators that the fundamental reason for this imbalance in modern Western Buddhist and religious studies lies in the close resemblance of certain fundamental symbols and concepts to those of Protestant Christianity. This resemblance has been commented on since the earliest contact with Europe in the sixteenth century. In later times, visitors who had a more positive view of Protestant tradition made a correspondingly more favorable appraisal of Shin, particularly its egalitarian religious ideals and rationalist social influence. On the whole, however, the perceived resemblance to Protestant Christianity has led many Western scholars, even those initially attracted to Japanese Zen, to assume that Shin represents a debased and simplified Buddhism for the masses. Jan van Bragt, a Catholic priest with long experience in Japan and thus surely another “inside observer,” characterizes the general attitude:

[T]he West is mainly interested in Buddhism as its antipode, partly in distrust of its own religious tradition. It is therefore most attracted to

³ Galen Amstutz asserts: “In spite of the major, perhaps even central, role played by Shin in early modern and modern Japanese history, Shin is practically unknown outside of Japan; even among academics it is widely misunderstood” (Amstutz 1997, p. ix).

these forms of Buddhism wherein that antipodal character appears most clearly—Theravada, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism. The Pure Land school, on the other hand, is perceived as very close to Christianity and far removed from the mainstream of Buddhism.⁴

The generally accepted “benign” explanation of neglect is that Shin, with its rejection of monasticism, contemplative practices, superstitious beliefs, and even Shintō rites, and its lack of a colorful pantheon of Buddhas or an aggressive social program, simply fails to interest Western researchers motivated by personal attraction to Buddhism as an alternative, exotic, or activist religious tradition. Van Bragt’s general account of the interests of many Western scholars—the view from “outside,” perhaps—is surely accurate as far as it goes.

I believe, however, that further analysis of the dominant views of Shin may be useful, for even in a case like van Bragt’s, awareness of the fundamental predisposition that has colored Western attitudes toward Pure Land Buddhist traditions does not keep him from adopting its basic assumptions in his own discussion. In brief, treatment of Shin Buddhism in the West has been based on resemblance with Protestant Christianity and has therefore been cast in an analytic mode of discussion framed by similarity and contrast. Moreover, this mode of discussion has not been simply comparative, but has imposed from the outset an understanding of Shin as internally divided, as though religious features wholly familiar to the West have been incongruously grafted onto alien roots.

In short, in the standard discussions of Shin Buddhism, including that of van Bragt, the elements of Shin have been divided in two, or separated out into two conceptual bins. On the one hand, there are the religious attitudes and social manifestations that have close correspondences within Christian tradition (Karl Barth, in his pioneering discussion of Shin in *Church Dogmatics*, lists: “religion of grace,” “Reformation doctrines of original sin, representative satisfaction, justification by faith alone, the gift of the Holy Ghost and thankfulness”). On the other, there are the elements that present instead teachings or symbols that appear distinct from any

⁴ van Bragt 1993, p. 47.

Christian counterpart (Barth states, “we miss any doctrine of the law and also of the holiness, or wrath of Amida. . . . In the Jōdo religion it is not Amida or faith in him, but this human goal of desire [for nirvana] which is the really controlling and determinative power”). These latter characteristics are generally understood to represent the attitudes of “mainstream Buddhism” or “general Mahāyāna.” In short, Shin is grasped as a tradition whose evolution has dislodged it somehow from general Buddhist soil, making it comprehensible only by situating it somewhere between Christianity and more “mainstream” Buddhism.

Van Bragt expounds this basic model of Shin as double in nature as follows:

The Buddhist Pure Land school contains within itself an unresolvable, living, and possibly creative, tension between its own particular religiosity and the mainstream of Buddhism. When going away too far from that mainstream, it is apt to fall into a kind of folk religion that is hardly recognizable as Buddhism. But on the other hand, when trying to stick too closely to the logic of that mainstream, it tends to lose its own originality and religious dynamism—as well as its inner affinity with Christianity.⁵

According to van Bragt, the “particular religiosity” or “religious dynamism” of Shin Buddhism lies in those elements that at once lend it an “inner affinity with Christianity” and bring it into tension with “the mainstream of Buddhism.” There are different ways of handling this dichotomizing model, but the central question here is less the particular manner in which it is shaped than the effect of taking it as a presupposed starting point. This is because once such a conceptual split is made, there seems to be little interest in or recognition of the possibilities of an integrated grasp of the divided elements. Further, there is little willingness to relinquish the fundamental coordinates for understanding of resemblance to Christianity and difference from “mainstream” Mahāyāna Buddhism.

⁵ van Bragt 1993, p. 56.

In the case of Barth, despite his perceptive account of the differences between Shin Buddhist tradition and Protestant Christianity, his polemical theological use of Shin to locate and underwrite the final uniqueness of Christianity caused him to disregard the differences he notes and to focus solely on the similarities. In his view, the entire significance of Shin lies precisely in its similarities with Christianity—which only highlight its character as a merely human creation and thus a foil to what he sees as true religion.

Not only theologians, but scholars of other fields have also found a stake in asserting the notion of Shin as “faith-oriented” lay Buddhism for the masses. Thus a Western historian, taking a sociological perspective, has deemed the assertion that Shin Buddhist thought is fundamentally rooted in Mahāyāna tradition “elitist” or “modernist.” A more subtle application of the same perspective is found in the field of interreligious dialogue, where contrasting Shin tradition with Christian attitudes tends to be labeled “reductionist.” Here, in an ingenious sleight of hand, it is argued that Western scholars need to uphold the basic character of Shin in the face of those Shin Buddhists who may resist the notion that their tradition is basically similar to Christian religiosity, and who may stubbornly insist on continuities with Mahāyāna tradition. In this view, the original bifurcation of Shin is once again simply assumed, and once again the significance of Shin tradition is located in its likeness to Christianity. What is new is the justification of these moves by labeling resemblance to Christian religiosity “Shin specificity” and nonresemblance “mainstream Buddhism.” It has even been suggested that Mahāyāna thought stands in a relation to Shin religiosity analogous to the relationship of Greek philosophy and Christianity. In this view, which of course turns Buddhist history upside-down to force the analogy, Shin would seem to have its center in a Christian-like religiosity and to stand in distant and uncertain relation to Mahāyāna tradition. So strong is the insistence on partitioning Shin Buddhism according to Western categories of Christian-like and nonChristian-like (i.e., Mahāyāna Buddhist) elements that any resistance to such an understanding is regarded as inherently suspect, a matter of mere apologetics, or ironically, of the influence of Western modernist demythologization.

Above I have outlined two issues that arise from a perspective on the margins of Japanese tradition, perhaps, between inside and outside, looking critically in both directions.

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