

# SHIN BUDDHISM

*By Paul Winemiller*

This paper will be an attempt at viewing in minute fashion one of the more prolific Buddhist sects in Japan today, that of the True Sect of the Pure Land (School), commonly known as Jōdo Shin(-shū). The paper will be divided into three sections. The first will deal with Shin as an historical off-shoot of Buddhism, the second with the doctrinal tenets and practices of the sect, and lastly, a short comparison with Christianity.

## I

As a distinct form of Mahayana Buddhism, Shin is a movement for the laity and not just for the priesthood. Its roots go back to the origin of the Mahayana school in India. Yet even there at the time of Christ, there was no history, and even the literature concerning the Western Pure Land doctrine was not known in Buddhist literature. However, tradition states that this doctrine is traced through China to India, where it is claimed it originated in the teaching of Vasubandhu, Nagarjuna, and possibly Ashvaghosha.

The Indian patriarch, Vasubandhu, laid great stress on the mystery of the one heart. "If men enter this faith, they may acquire the merit of the great ocean of divine treasure, and having entered paradise, may have the joy of returning to the forest of human passion, to manifest themselves in the garden of life and death for the salvation of their fellow men."<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Armstrong, R. C., *An Introduction to Japanese Buddhist Sects*, Toronto 1950, p. 218.

Nagarjuna likened the way of salvation by one's own effort to a toilsome journey by land. He noted that it was not impossible to attain the desired end, but that the way was so lonely and toilsome that very few continued to the end. On the other hand, he compared the way of salvation by faith to a voyage in a fine ship over smooth waters. Without effort the end is attained quickly, so by the power and merit of Amida we enter at once into the company of those who will certainly be born in paradise.

As one author puts it: "In Mahayana-Buddhism, the monk-soteriology of Hinayana becomes a complicated and huge system of various lay-soteriologies. The way is open to everyone. The thirst for deliverance reaches out above the normal goal of deliverance from the dreary cycle of *samsara*; it is, so to speak, a gigantic soteriological ambition that dominates the system, for the new goal, 'the great Vehicle', is to become oneself a Bodhisattva, a Saviour and Deliverer of erring, miserable man."<sup>2</sup>

In effect, then, the followers of the Pure Realm sects of Buddhism seek Buddhahood, or Enlightenment, through rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Realm of Highest Happiness. As can be seen above, rebirth in the Pure Realm is attained by faith in the power of Amida's vow to save all beings and by the calling of the Buddha's name in faith. This indeed is a far cry from the original intent of Shakyamuni.

Missionaries carried this new branch of the faith to China about 150 A.D. About 350 Hui-yüan founded the Pure Land School, which taught an easy way to salvation, based on the

---

2. Kraemer, H., *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Grand Rapids 1956, p. 175.

Sukhavati Sutra, commonly known as The Array of the Happy Land, which describes Amitabha's Paradise. Inscriptions and images to Amitabha indicate that his kingdom of Infinite Light in the West came to the fore about 650, and soon such relics spread throughout China. "After 650 Amidism was provided with an elaborate theology. Tzu-min (680-748) was one of the earliest to concentrate on the mere repetition of the name of Amitabha."<sup>3</sup>

Yet even before this time, the new-found faith had found allegiance in Japan. For around the middle of the sixth century the image of the Nyorai now in the Zenkōji temple was enshrined in Emperor Kōgyoku's place, and as such was the first object before which men repeated the prayer of the Jōdo teaching in Japan. "In the reign of the Empress Suiko (593-628) the great priest Eon went to China, where he studied for over thirty years. The year after his return, in the twelfth year of the Emperor Jomei (629-641), Eon lectured on a Jōdo sutra in the imperial palace. From that time the teaching was taught more and more. After listening to Eon's teaching, the Emperor Tenji (662-681) made an image of Amida Buddha 'sixteen feet high', and enshrined it in a temple."<sup>4</sup>

Later we learn that in the Heian era Jōdo teaching was encouraged by the Tendai priests. On his return from China the Tendai priest Dengyō introduced the four forms of meditation on Amida, one of which was to walk for ninety days and repeat, "Hail, Amida Buddha." Faith in the Amida Buddha was common in the Nara era in Japan and played a subsidiary

---

3. Conze, E., *Buddhism*, Oxford 1951, p. 205-206.

4. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

role in Tendai and Sanron. In the Kamakura period the movement was organized into a number of schools of which the Pure Land School founded by Hōnen and the True Sect of the Pure Land founded by Shinran are the most important.

It wasn't until he was forty-two that Hōnen came to realize the truth of the Pure Realm teachings. He gained his inspiration from the Chinese master, Shan-tao and the Chinese tradition. There the practice had been to stress the dilemma of man who is bound by evil and by his inability to attain Enlightenment through meditative practices in this age of the decline of the law. Since human efforts failed it was inevitable that the Chinese and Japanese would grab onto the Pure Land faith in Amida outlined above. On the basis of his study and experience Hōnen founded the new faith (Jōdo) in 1175. For him the calling of the Name and the Thought of the Buddha, *Namu Amida Butsu* — "Homage to Amida Buddha" — is the practice which gives evidence of faith in the External Power of Amida's vow and brings salvation.

Shinran Shōnin was one of several of Hōnen's disciples who broke away from the practices which became paramount in Jōdo. The sect which he founded is known as the True Sect of the Pure Land. He claimed to be a follower of the teachers of the Pure Land who had gone before, to include Hōnen and Genshin in Japan, Shan-tao, Tao-ch'ou, and T'an-luan in China, and Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna in India. Yet he was to introduce a new aspect of Amida worship, that so enthralled Japanese Buddhists, that today Shin claims over twelve million or seventy-seven percent of all Pure Land Buddhist. Nationally this means that over thirty-three per cent of the Buddhists in Japan are

of the Shin sect.

What was the new approach that Shinran introduced? Basically it is this. The Shin sect believes that the only practice required for salvation for every man is the calling of the Name and Title based on faith in the Amida Buddha, and all other practices are to be abandoned. He gave a puritan twist to Hōnen's Gospel. To him it is faith alone, and no works. Thus he rejected faith in good works as a means of salvation which had sprung up in the original branch of the Jōdo-shū. For in the latter, practices other than the calling of the Name and Title are also a way to rebirth to the Pure Realm. "The emphasis of the Shin sect upon the exclusive use of the Nembutsu in faith, rejecting all dependence upon oneself and relying only on the External Power, leads also to the rejection of any concern for lucky or unlucky times, fortunate directions, astrology, or prayer to gods and spirits."<sup>5</sup> This would exclude many of the Jōdo sects which place great emphasis on man's efforts as well as faith in Amida. Such an aid is the popular Jōdo Bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara (Chin. Kuan-yin; Jap. Kannon), who is freely called upon to grant material and other requests.

A more microscopic survey will show Shinran's true motives. He attempted to show the difference between the teaching of Jōdo and the so-called quasi-Jōdo doctrine, by drawing attention to the difference between the three important vows of Amida, the three sutras which teach Jōdo doctrine, and the three different degrees of man's capacity for salvation. For him the important vow was the eighteenth, which is con-

---

5. Morgan, K.W., *The Path of the Buddha*, New York 1956, p. 335.

tained in the Dai-muryōju Sutra. It is the most liberal, and as the basic vow for the True Sect it provides for universal salvation by the power of Amida Buddha, who will take all men who have faith in him to the original and eternal paradise.

According to Shinran, the nineteenth and twentieth vows, based on the Kan-muryōju Sutra and the Amida Sutra respectively, are regarded as quasi-Jōdo teaching, and as preparing man for a secondary paradise or purgatory, which is inferior to the Eternal Pure Western Land. "The salvation provided in the nineteenth vow is obtained by constantly repeating the name of Amida, while the salvation provided for in the twentieth vow is obtained by the practice of good works. The latter is called 'True Gate' (*Shinmon*), the former is called 'Important Gate' (*Yōmon*), so both of these are important, but secondary to the true doctrine of the eighteenth vow, which demands neither the repetition of Amida's name nor the practice of virtue as a condition of salvation. By it, Amida fulfills all religious and moral obligations for those who fully trust in him."<sup>6</sup>

Shinran differed with his master, Hōnen, for the latter emphasized the importance of repeating the name of Amida as a good work. One of his quotes is as follows: "Repeating the name of Amida is the basis of the work of being born in paradise through Amida Buddha."<sup>7</sup> Because men could not help themselves they must turn to Amida, in whose name lies not only the request but also the conduct, which is the condition of salvation. With this the pupil disagreed. Repetition of

---

6. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

7. Ibid.

Amida's name was not the condition of salvation ; it was only a means of showing our gratitude to Amida for the work we know he has performed in response to our faith. Shinran carried this farther into the realm of ethics. He recognized that the five works are not intended to help men obtain salvation, but are nothing more than expressions of gratitude for salvation already obtained. Thus, Shinran's new concept of justification by faith alone leaves no room for commands or the law. When a member of Shin reads the sutras, repeats the name of Amida, worships, meditates, and offers praise, food and incense to Amida, he is doing it only as an expression of thankfulness and love to Amida.

In a nutshell, those who put their trust in Amida, receive the seed of Buddhahood by trusting in the eighteenth vow as it is written : " Having heard the name of Amida, they rejoice and trust in him the whole heart."<sup>8</sup>

In closing this historical development of Jōdo Shin-shū it might be well to take a more intimate look at the founder himself to see what drove him to this new revolutionary concept in Mahayana thinking. We see that Shinran Shōnin was of noble birth, born at the close of the twelfth century, and that he entered the temple as a boy. His rise was meteoric both in scholarship and society. Once he received a beautiful gift from the emperor, which naturally elated him. But this incident caused him remorse, for he was reminded of a former Buddhist saint who after a similar experience had been scolded by his mother for his joy over such worldly honors. With this he decided to retire from the world and to seek peace of mind

---

8. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

by fasting and prayer before the Buddha. Yet after three weeks of prostration he still hadn't attained peace. It is reported that for one hundred days in succession he walked several miles to spend the night in prayer before the Goddess of Mercy, but this caused him no respite. "On the last night, when he had become quite desperate, the goddess appeared to him in a trance, saying: 'The important way of salvation in this lost world is the repetition of Amida's name. Go to Hōnen Shōnin; he will save you from the sea of suffering.'"<sup>9</sup>

This he did, and soon he opened up his soul to Hōnen. Hōnen cautioned him to give up trying to save himself, and to put his trust in Amida, the Lord of excellent life and light. Just as soon his tired soul found peace and joy in believing. As has been noted, Hōnen's principle made it possible to wipe out the distinction between men and women. Amida's mercy was so great that even a wife and the responsibilities of a home were no hindrance to a religious life. Thus tradition says that Shinran soon wedded the daughter of a leading government official of the time, Kanezane Fujiwara. I don't want to say that Shinran was entirely motivated by the effects of his new adventure into wedlock, but it certainly seems to have started him on his way to the new doctrine. His marriage certainly drew the outrage of many of his fellow Buddhist disciples.

Yet his new-found faith in Amida and its resultant freedom caused him now to extoll the salvation of all men, neither female nor male, nor married or unmarried — there were no

---

9. Armstrong, R.C., *Buddhism and Buddhists in Japan*, New York 1927, p. 87.



limits to the power of Amida. The following story from tradition gives some credence to his stand. One day when Shinran was returning to Mt. Hiei, the central sanctuary of the Tendai sect, he had met his future wife who desired to go up to the sacred mountain to worship. This amazed Shinran for no woman had ever been allowed to tread the sacred mountains of Japan. Many who had tried before had been turned to stone or pine trees. Yet the woman retorted: "Although I am a woman, I have a human heart, and my human heart longs for salvation. Is there no peace or joy for me?"<sup>10</sup> The disciple advised her to proceed to one of the nunneries, but she replied that they were just as the monasteries, places where people delve into ancient lore. What she desired was a simple faith for simple people that all her sisters in Japan might enjoy the blessing of salvation. After handing Shinran a crystal lens, she said: "[This jewel has the property of focusing light in one place until it burns intensely. Take it and use it as a symbol of what you are to do for religion. Concentrate your message upon some simple statement of faith for simple people, that their hearts may burn with its convincing, saving power."<sup>11</sup> After this, she struck her breast three times, cursed Buddha, and disappeared as mysteriously as she had come. Of Shinran it is said he turned thoughtfully up the mountain, muttering over and over again: "Truly, if a religion will not save the ignorant and the women, it is a lie."<sup>12</sup>

Whether the foregoing is authentic or not, Shinran is reported

---

10. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

to have married the woman, and when his unique innovations caused him to be banished to a distant place, he and his wife went out among the peasantry and cheered their hearts by this simple gospel of salvation for simple people.

## II

This leads us to a comprehensive presentation of the tenets and doctrines of the Jōdo Shin sect. And of a more complex endeavor I cannot imagine. For here is a heretic sect of Mahayana lineage which foregoes the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path in order that it might carry the great Buddha's compassion or mercy to all people. In so doing it has a mythological basis; yet, founded on the popular sympathy of a Buddhist priest, it has, more than any other Buddhist sect, attempted to meet the laity where they are and minister to their needs. From this humanitarian thrust emanating from religious motives we have one of the more highly developed ethical cults of Mahayana Buddhism.

A good starting place would be to look at the standard canon of Shin Buddhism as selected from among the Mahayana *Tripitaka* by Shinran Shōnin. These consist of the three sutras following: "The Larger Sutra on the Eternal Buddha, or the Larger *Sukhavati-vyuha-sutra*, or the *Dai-muryōju-kyō*, translated into Chinese by Sanghavarman in 252 A.D.; the Meditation Sutra on the Eternal Buddha or the *Amita-yur-buddha-dhyana-sutra*, or the *Kan-muryōju-kyō*, translated into Chinese by Kalayacas in 524 A.D.; and The Smaller Sutra on Amida or the Smaller *Sukhavati-vyuha-sutra*, or the *Amida-kyō*, put

into Chinese by Kumarajiva in 402 A.D.”<sup>13</sup> These three are referred to as the Triple Sutra. Of these, it is the first, or Larger Sutra, which holds the predominant place in Shin Buddhism. As has been noted, it contains in its eighteenth vow all that is needed in the new concept of justification by faith found in Jōdo-Shin. In essence, this Great Sutra tells how Dharmakara, as a Bodhisattva striving for Enlightenment, makes forty-eight vows to help ordinary people be reborn to his selfless Pure Realm where they could attain Nirvana by hearing, believing, and rejoicing in the merit of the name and title of Amida. As a Buddha his vows are fulfilled and the land of the Western Paradise is established, with salvation available to all men by the great mercy and the power of Amida’s main vow.

How Shinran differentiated the True Sect from Pure Land, or pure Jōdo from quasi-Jōdo teaching has already been explained in the previous section. He was intent, through the power of his new-found Saviour Amida, to save all people, and through the Great Vow of the Larger Sutra he found the means. It is interesting to note how the Pure Land founders, to include Shinran, have read into this Sutra in order to carry out their radical doctrines. Yet they have gone to great pains to give a sound philosophical foundation to their tenets.

In the Larger Sutra we see Shakyamuni preaching to Ananda, one of his disciples, concerning the Pure Land, Amida’s World of Bliss, where he reigns since he attained Buddhahood millions of years before. This land of bliss is described as one which is prosperous, rich, fertile, lovely, where there is no sound of

---

13. Ryūkyō Fujimoto, *An Outline of the Triple Sutra of Shin Buddhism*, Kyoto 1955, p. 40.

sin, obstacle, misfortune and destruction. It was the Buddha's compassionate desire to save all mankind that caused him to forestall his own enlightenment so that he might teach others how to attain the great prize. The proponents of Shin claim that the Buddha's own enlightenment under the Bodhi tree was climaxed with his finding of the full life and light, that of Amitabha. We get a picture of this from the following: "Very many sermons were delivered by Shakyamuni during his lifetime, accordingly the number of sutras is large. His sermons varied with his audience, but almost always he taught most willingly about Amitabha, as Amitabha was the truth he had found in his Enlightenment. He did not teach about him objectively, but subjectively with the authority of Amitabha, as he himself was Amitabha and what he taught was Amitabha's doctrine. In these sutras Amitabha acclaimed the all-pervading light and eternal life, whose source he is, and unto those that sit in darkness he gave light, and life unto those in the shadow of death. All Shakyamuni's sermons during his lifetime are concentrated on this point; the salvation of all beings from pain and misery in the present world. This gives a sufficient reason why the sutra should be called the True Benefit."<sup>14</sup>

Here we see the true genius of Shin as it seeks to identify the Buddha with Amida and Amida with the believer. And underlying it all is the attainment of bliss, which is nothing but unity in the ultimate. "Thus wherever the spirit moves, there is life, there is a Person. The formless, the eternal, the boundless, the universal, the infinite is thus personified as the

---

14. West Hongwanji, *Synopsis of the Jōdo Shinshū Creed*, Kyoto 1922, pp. 19-20.

supreme person. Amida is such a personification in the enlightened spiritual consciousness of Shakyamuni. The formless essential law (Dharmakaya: *hosshin*) which is beyond description and without attributes, revealed itself as Amida, the spirit of joy, in the enlightened consciousness of Shakyamuni, the human Buddha. Amida is the supreme spirit from whom all spiritual revelations grow and to whom all personalities are related."<sup>15</sup>

Thus when we get away from our craving finite selves, our infinite selves take over and instead of seeking wealth we seek freedom and joy. Necessity now ceases and our function is not to get but to be. This is what happened to Shakyamuni, and this is what can happen to all men. We are to be one with Amida. Man only becomes true when he is one with Amida. Yet this emancipation is not merely one of self-abnegation, but as Shakyamuni taught also one of love. When we look at Shinran we find that the naturalness (Nirvana) he preached was nothing less than the emancipation of the self. It consisted of a holy freedom through the melting of our self-power (*jiriki*) in the Other Power (*tariki*), through the surrender of our self-will (*hakarai*) to the eternal will. And the eternal will is familiarity with Amida, the infinite light.

It can be seen from the above that myth has a large part in the teachings of Shin. How else can we explain the essence of Amidism, with the mythological Bodhisattva Dharmakala, and the Triple Sutra with the attempts to propel man into the Pure Land? It is an uncanny but successful venture in inserting the element of faith into the canon and teaching of

---

15. Kenryō Kanamatsu, *Naturalness*, Los Angeles 1956, p. 49.

the Buddha. Yet it has an orthodox ring about it despite the reliance on Amida, for when the maze is cleared away one sees nothing but the original self-assertion of man to conquer himself.

That Shin has a variegated philosophical foundation can be seen in the writings of Shinran himself. His *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō* (doctrine, practice, faith, attainment), the fundamental text-book of Shin, is a collection of one hundred and forty-three passages culled from twenty-one sutras in which Shinran found his faith completely substantiated. Let us take a glimpse at Shinran's existential philosophy in the eyes of a Shin scholar. "The teachings taught by Shakyamuni throughout his fifty years of missionary activity after his Enlightenment are no doubt the expression of the spiritual truth reflected in the serene mirror of his enlightened consciousness. He expounded *dharma* or the Essential Law in various ways, and his discourses may be divided into various categories, as most Buddhist scholars do, such as 'true' and 'provisional,' or 'real' and 'temporal.' But all of them must be regarded as expounding the inner meaning of his spiritual consciousness. Some of the sutras lay emphasis on 'Thou' as revealed in the enlightened consciousness of the Human Buddha, some others are more concerned with the 'I' phase of his spiritual consciousness, and still others with the interfusion of 'I' and 'Thou.'"<sup>16</sup>

It was the interfusion of the "I" and the "Thou" which Shinran found in the Larger Sutra which caused him to adopt it as the teaching of the True Sect. He notes that in Amida "Thou" is revealed in the enlightened consciousness of Sha-

---

16. Kanamatsu, *op. cit.*, pp. 51—52.

kyamuni, and as such assumes the saviour role to the world. The Revealer Shakyamuni, however, is the "I," and as such, assumes the all-comprehensive compassionate attitude towards all beings and he himself becomes the Saviour. Thus, the Saviour Amida is hidden entirely and concealed behind Shakyamuni, and it takes the eye of the spirit to discern him existing in his "Thouness" in the selfsame spiritual consciousness of the Revealer. Here then is an amazing corollary to the Christian Trinity.

The question then arises: What is the relation between faith and the vow of Amida? If the vow is all-important what value has faith? If it is faith alone which saves, then we are returning to man's merit. Shinran concluded that faith and the vow were one. To him the essence of the True Sect is that the power of faith proceeds from the original vow. The continuous repetition of Amida's name is a revelation of man's faith. The use of the word "Hail" (*namu*) implies at once our desire or prayer for salvation, and also the power of the vow. Being born in paradise by the power of faith is the same thing as being saved by Amida's vow.

We might speak for a minute about sin in Shin Buddhism. Sin to Shinran was the cause of all selfishness and craving in man; and this sin was the direct result of man's action in his previous lives. Thus he classified all men as sinners and evildoers, utterly incapable of realizing enlightenment by themselves. It is only through the power of the Buddha's vow that men are caused to believe that by the merit of the external power all sinners are freed and true enlightenment is perfected. Even as ordinary men, those who have faith in the vow of

Amida, or Buddha, will have their sins completely annihilated and their rebirth and attainment of Buddhahood completed. "With death, there is rebirth, and at that very instant we become Buddha."<sup>17</sup> Shin also gives thanks to Amida for salvation through the reciting of *Namu Amida Butsu*, which means, "Homage to Amida Buddha."

Shinran spoke much of the power of the *Nembutsu*. He referred to it as the true vehicle of salvation. It was Amida's gift to man, and when he comes to realize that he, as a *karma*-bound human being, has no good conduct to rely upon, and when he becomes fully conscious of his heinous sinfulness, then the *Nembutsu* will rise itself from the depths of his heart and he shall be instantly taken across into the Pure Land or Western Paradise of Buddhahood. The only thing that keeps man from reaching paradise is his own self-will and doubt. Unless these are removed he will never hear and respond to the sheltering compassion of Amida, contained in the *Nembutsu*. Amida's call must provoke an unconditional faith in the Great Compassion, or absolute passivity and surrender to the Other Power, or else man is denied the only direct and the safest path leading to rebirth in the Pure Land.

"The *Nembutsu* is neither practice nor virtue to one who practises it. It is no practice, because the practice does not originate in one's self-will (*hakarai*); it is no virtue, because it is not an act of godness originating in one's self-will. Since it arises solely from the Other Power (*tariki*) and is beyond one's self-power (*jiriki*), it is no practice and no virtue to one who practises it. Once faith is established in us, the work of

---

17. Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 336.



our being born in the Pure Land is left entirely to the Will of Amida, and so no room is left for our self-will to take part in the work. The more we are conscious of our sinfulness, all the more we rely upon the Vow's Power. Then the meek and serene heart will issue from naturalness. As regards our Rebirth, we should in all ways and things abandon sagacious contrivance, and being enamoured, heart and soul, of Amida, should constantly remember his Unfathomable Grace. Then the *Nembutsu* will rise of itself to our lips."<sup>18</sup>

These are the amazing doctrinal tenets of Shin, which certainly aid the simple, common man to reach the goal of Nirvana, or naturalness or the Western Paradise, whichever you prefer. It becomes more amazing, if one thinks of Christian theology, in its existential application. For, to Shinran, the *Nembutsu* was not merely the recollecting of Amida's Great Vow, it was and is the losing of one's self in his will as well. In other words, it is the coming of man to his existential limits and jumping over the abyss which opens up before him. Through *Nembutsu* he bridges over the bottomless abyss of his sinful existence and transfers back his heart into the Original Heart in the Pure Land. But he is always becoming; and this for the sake of his suffering fellowman. His human heart does not stay in the Pure Land, but comes back to this land of defilement and feels every human sin and suffering as his own. It actually smacks of the tension between Christian justification and sanctification. "Thus, the heart, pure and repenting in one blissful and suffering at once, is constantly reaching the other shore and returning to this shore — and

---

18. Kanamatsu, *op. cit.*, pp. 85, 87.

this constant transference over there and back here in one act is the spiritual life or naturalness, the working of the Great Compassionate Heart.”<sup>19</sup>

And as if this isn't enough to calm the conscience-stricken, sin-laden Buddhist, the following “Reformation” note is rung by the reformer Shinran: “Although I utter the *Nembutsu*, overflowing joy is hard to arise. No longing hastens me to the Pure Land. How might I accept this? To this his word was: I, Shinran, too had this doubt with me. Now I find you, Yuiebō, too have the same doubt with you. But be assured. In as much as no joy wells up in you for the matter at which you ought really to be overjoyed, your Rebirth in the Pure Land is so much surer. It is the lusts that hinder our hearts from feeling joy. But all this Amida Buddha was well aware of beforehand. Therefore he called us ‘lust-ridden mortals.’ It was for the sake of the beings such as we are that the Other Power’s Compassionate Vow was vowed. As I take things in this light, I am all the more filled with sweet hope . . . .”<sup>20</sup>

Undergirding the Shin sect is the philosophical background of monistic idealism. Although Shinran avowedly gave up on the intellectual processes of the mind in order to attain Buddhahood, he continued to carry with him the philosophical world view which had been ingrained in him during his twenty years in the Tendai sect. Simply, this means that despite the efficacy of faith and the salvation of all men, Shin is guilty, just as all other sects, in believing that there is no self. The goal of Shin is to make clear the truth of a concrete synthesis of ‘I’ and

---

19. Kanamatsu, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

20. Kanamatsu, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

'Thou' in the enlightened mind, and this we have seen it has done with its mythological Amida worship. It's a prefabricated Saviour they have, and understandably so, since the human cry of salvation from suffering and death is so strong. Thus salvation in Shin is none other "than the interdependence of the one and the many, and when this is grasped all can live in the glory of the enlightened Buddha-consciousness."<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately then, Shin is pantheistic. In effect it is philosophically pantheism; yet in its eagerness to accommodate the common man it adopts faith and the personal view of God. Once more Shin is polytheistic, for Amida is thought to embody all the other great Buddhas and Bodhisattvas within himself. Amida is the ground of being, the ultimate reality for the groping. Finally, Shin is atheistic, for essentially it believes that all things arise, exist, decay, and disappear out of man's store-consciousness, which creates the objects which it perceives and is therefore identical with them. Herein lies the origination of Amida. Although, as we have noted, Amida is described as the all-powerful Other, he is actually not to be distinguished from the true self.

We haven't said much of the ethical consequences of Shin Enlightenment, except that all works and *Nembutsu* are done out of gratitude to Amida. The heinous sinfulness of man is actually nothing less than his inability to know the truth, not that he is morally sinful. Thus Shin is basically amoral. Whoever believes in the truth, he is saved, good or bad. Value distinctions are meaningless because all things are one and stem

---

21. Callaway, T. N., *Japanese Buddhism and Christianity*, Tokyo 1957, p. 103.

from man's absorption in the universe, a universe which is identified with his own consciousness and attempts at enlightenment. Here again *karma* is to blame and not the man himself. There is no judge here. Man "is a victim of this suffering life, and anything and everything is overlooked as he tries to extricate himself. Certainly we would say this is not realistic. Not so Shinran: Even though we commit sinful deeds through the weakness of our will, never should our faith be shaken or disturbed, for there is no sin nor evil that can hinder or hamper the miraculous Power of the Divine Promise of Amida."22 This idea that morality counts as nothing goes back a long time. "About 150 A.D. we find in the *Divyavadana* a story which illustrates how lightly even at that time moral rules might be regarded. Dharmaruci, who lived three aeons ago, had killed his parents, killed an Arhat, and burnt down a monastery. Nevertheless, the future Shakyamuni ordained him with the words: 'Of what use are the rules? Only repeat constantly the formula, Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma?' "23

Despite this personal amorality the Shin sect has learned to adapt socially just as it has spiritually. The Shin has a doctrinal basis for social action as well. In its two parts it is known as the *Shintai-mon* (Holy Part) and the *Zokutai-mon* (Secular Part). The Holy Part is nothing more than acknowledging the compassion of Amida. The Secular Part, however, is the practice of sound moral principles as members of society, standing upon the faith. The former is primary and faces the Buddha,

---

22. Callaway, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

23. Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

the secular is secondary and looks downward. In any event, the two are likened to a bird or to the two wheels of a cart, and a Shin believer cannot be perfect in his faith if he is wanting in either. In the words of one Shin author: "When we see the very spirit of the Shin-shū doctrine moving in a follower's firm belief, in his devotion, in his kind words, or in his conduct, we cannot but feel that the Jōdo Shin-shū with its Holy and Secular Parts is not only a mere doctrine, but, in very sooth, the manifestation of the living faith of our Founder Shinran Shōnin."<sup>24</sup>

On the practical level the Shin attempts to become a religion of the common man as much as possible. Its acceptance of women, marriage among the priests, and the abolition of all rituals make it especially appealing to the simple folk. Its democratic spirit and sanction of social duties has wide appeal and has put the sect in the limelight in the last fifty years with the industrial community, something no other Buddhist school has been able to do. Much of its appeal rests upon the fact that the believer in salvation by faith does not need to do penance, to build costly tombstones and pagodas for the dead, to hold special ceremonies to assist his dead to avoid hell or get to heaven. The Shin adherent possesses a "seal of discipleship" which shows that he has accepted Amida by faith. This device is thought to help in rooting out sin and in promoting the good, and it is placed in the coffin to assist the spirit on its way to paradise.

The Shin stresses instruction through sermons and lectures. Sometimes there are special lectures and study societies, but

---

24. West Hongwanji, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

more often the messages are given in temples where the believers hear the *dharma*, recite the Name of the Buddha, and take part in other religious activities. One of the most popular of the latter is the thanksgiving ceremony held for one week, beginning every November 21st, to express gratitude to Shinran for the blessings the believers enjoy. With fasting and purification they worship his spirit and read the scriptures. Evangelistic services are held in conjunction with these thanksgiving ceremonies.

As an organization, Shin has a number of organized temples with its own headquarters, and it manages its affairs through elected delegates from the leaders of the congregations. Social concern has reached the point where Shin representatives manage schools, hospitals, and other service projects which are an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving and joyfulness for salvation. The married leaders of the temples devote all of their time to religious duties and are responsible for temple activities and ceremonies. The believers share the financial upkeep of the leaders and the temple. In each temple an image of Amida or a scroll bearing his name is placed, purely as symbols of the contents of salvation. It is to be noted that Shin is the most jealous for pure Amida worship among all Pure Land sects. Art expression is found in Shin through classical Japanese and Western style music, the famous *Nō* plays, and the ancient tea ceremony. All of these are performed out of a spirit of gratitude.

As a grass-roots religious movement, it is understandable that Shin has always demanded freedom of worship. They expect this from the government. Thus Shin follows the pattern of

separation of church and state, although they haven't held to this as a fast rule in the past.

### III

This last section will deal with an attempt at comparison of Christianity with Buddhism. Due to the generalness of the topic, I will not consign my statements only to Shin Buddhism. To give a fair picture, I first will briefly compare the basic tenets of the two faiths, and secondly, show some of the similar practices in both today.

Comparing Buddhism and Christianity, it is important to remember that despite the apparent differences between the Hinayana and Mahayana, both are basically one under the banner of monistic idealism. In the first place, Buddhism has an agnostic approach to morality while Christianity is built upon the Hebrew monotheistic conception of a Personal God. Buddhism sees suffering due to *karma*; Christianity as a consequence of rebellion against God. The followers of the Buddha provoke the Eight-fold Path or man-made gods, such as Amida, in order to escape the suffering and sin of this life; Christ's disciples rely purely on the vicarious act of God. Basically the Buddhist is pessimistic; whereas the Christian has hope and lives out his life in response to God. Myth serves as the foundation of salvation in Buddhism; the human Jesus crucified by Pontius Pilate attests to the historical drama of the Christian Revelation.

When we look at the similarities of the two faiths, we find that both teach a high ethic, though with differing motives.

Both embrace the inwardness of true religion, and both teach gentleness. "Overcome anger with love," says a modern Buddhist, "and overcome greed by liberality."<sup>25</sup> Compare this with the Sermon on the Mount and the Great Commandment.

There can be no doubt that the practices of these faiths have rubbed off one upon the other. Dr. Rhys Davids notes that the Buddha legends so influenced the Christian Church that the Buddha became two Christian Saints, Baalam and Joasaph, whose feast is mentioned in the Roman calendar on November 27th. However, evidence supports the claim that Buddhism has borrowed more from Christianity than vice versa. The generally good example of Christianity has helped to raise the cultural standards of the priests. One of the more important influences of Christianity upon Japanese Buddhism has been the new interpretation of historic Buddhist doctrines in terms of personality and individuality. Self-extinction has become self-denial in the new modern setting. Along other lines we find Buddhism adapting Christian hymns to Buddhist praise and worship; adopting Christian methods of work; organizing Buddhist Associations for young men and women; the establishing of Buddhist Sunday Schools; the encouraging of women suffrage and the sprouting of numerous Buddhist charitable institutions. There can be no doubt from this that Christianity has been the cause of a great rejuvenation within Buddhism during the last fifty years.

When we look at the Shin sect as it stacks up with Christianity, we find some revealing facts in addition to what the

---

25. *World Dominion*, "How Strong is Buddhism?" London 1957, p. 188.

26. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 313.



aforesaid has disclosed. One source, a converted Buddhist,<sup>27</sup> has been making a special study to show the penetration of Christian influence upon the teaching of Amida. He believes that the great patriarch Shan-tao, who influenced Hōnen and Shinran, was a young man when Nestorianism entered China, and this scholar feels that he could not but be influenced by the rapid rise of Nestorianism in China. He points to a rumor that there is a Chinese translation of the New Testament under a statue of Shinran Shōnin as one of the temple treasures, and that there is no doubt that the Shōnin himself was influenced by the New Testament.

More than any other Buddhist Sect, Shin owes much of its modern day appeal to its active competition with and borrowing from Christianity. Its congregational polity, married clergy, and social consciousness bear witness to this fact. "A look at the able sermons of the Shin preacher, Toda Kanae, with their elevated sincerity and their positive evaluation of the world, is sufficient to convince one to what a high degree Christian apprehensions leaven the outlook of many Buddhists in Japan."<sup>28</sup>

When we compare the doctrinal tenets of Shin with Christianity, there is little we can add from what has already been said. However, due to its unique "reformation" flavor, the disguised distinctions must be elaborated upon. It is true that Shinran sees man entirely dependent upon faith in Amida; but as Kraemer so rightly points out,<sup>29</sup> God and His holy reality do not enter his sphere of thinking. His *sola fide* is not that

27. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

28. Kraemer, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

29. Kraemer, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

of Biblical Realism. His gospel is unequivocally man-centered. Thus as Kraemer concludes, Shinran's whole desire for human salvation is borne out in the fact that Amida and his Vow rest their claims in the realm of mythology, and not as Christianity in the historical person of Jesus Christ. Shinran, thus, embraced the philosophy of the basic goodness of man — which he can truly find in himself, if he only will. Thus, in the final analysis, the law, or *dharma* has the central place and not faith if a Shin adherent is to make it to the Western Paradise. A look at the Creed of the Shin Sect reveals this: "Rejecting all evil or ignorant teachings and giving up the power of the Lower-self, we rely with our whole heart upon Amitabha for our Enlightenment in the life to come. We believe that at the very moment that our minds are opened to the inflow of His Truth, Nirvana is assured to us, and we hold that from that time on the invocation *Namu-Amidabutsu* comes from the heart in gratitude and thankfulness for His Mercy. Moreover, being grateful to our Founder Shinran Shōnin, and succeeding Head Priests, for these profound teachings, *we must strive to keep the Law all through our lives.*"<sup>30</sup> (Italics mine.)

---

30. West Hongwanji, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

## Kanji Glossary

*Amida-kyō* 阿弥陀經

*Dri-muryōju-kyō* 大無量壽經

Dengyō 伝教

Eon 惠隱

Fujiwara, Kanezane 藤原兼実

Genshin 源信

*hakarai* はからい

Hōnen 法然

*hosshin* 法身

Hui-yūan 慧遠

jiriki 自力

Jōdo Shin-shū 浄土真宗

Jomei (Emperor) 舒明

*Kan-muryōju-kyō* 観無量壽經

Kannon 観音

Kōgyoku (Empress) 皇極

*Kyō-gyō-shin-shō* 教行真証

*Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏

*Nembutsu* 念仏

*nyorai* 如来

Sanron 三論

Shan-tao 善導

*shinmon* 真門

Shinran 親鸞

*shintai-mon* 真諦門

Suiko (Empress) 推古

Tao-ch'ou 道綽

T'an-luan 曇鸞

*tariki* 他力

Tendai 天台

Tenji (Emperor) 天智

Tzu-min 慈愍

*yōmon* 要門

Zenkōji 善光寺

*zokutai-mon* 俗諦門