

## Pure Land Buddhism and Modernization in Japan and the United States

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It is a great honor to be asked to give an address to the National Council of the Buddhist Churches of America. I have long been associated with the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, working with both faculty and students, and have also enjoyed a wonderful visit to Ryukoku University in Japan several years ago. So I do not really feel a stranger to this group. While in my studies of Japanese religion I have never specialized in Jodo Shinshu, I have been constantly aware of its importance and its religious profundity.

I would like to consider tonight a theme I have long been preoccupied with, both in Japan and the United States, namely, the relation between religion and modernization. Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* argues that Protestantism had significantly contributed to the creation of what we have come to call a "work ethic" that was highly favorable to economic development. In *Tokugawa Religion* I argue that there were similar developments in Tokugawa Japan. I discuss such paradigmatic figures as Ishida Baigan and Ninomiya Sontoku, but I also look at tendencies within Jodo Shinshu. A whole section of my book is devoted to the effect of Shinshu teachings on the prosperous merchants of Omi Province. I quoted an Omi Shinshu priest, among others, as follows:

. . . externally to obey the government laws and not forget the way of the five (Confucian) virtues, internally to believe deeply in the original vow (of Amida), to

entrust the good and evil of this world to the causes of the past, whether *samurai*, peasant, merchant or artisan, each to have his family occupation as his highest intention, then they will be called good pilgrims of the Pure Land.')

There is every reason to believe that similar attitudes continued to be significant among Japanese immigrants to the United States. They are part of the explanation of the capacity of members of the Buddhist Churches of America to prosper and contribute significantly to American society.

Let me sum up my argument. I am trying to suggest that one of the reasons that Japan and the United States are relatively successful modern societies with strong economies is that aspects of their traditional religious, ethical and social practices have not only reinforced economic development but also contained its destructive consequences, and that these practices have survived even in the midst of the rapid changes of our recent history.

Many theorists have argued that modernity inevitably leads to secularization and they have predicted and even discerned the dissolution of religion or at least its grave weakening in modern society. Certainly, religion is not a very strong force among intellectuals in both Japan and the United States. But often their own theories have prevented intellectuals from seeing how religion is alive in the larger society and among the common people. In

both Japan and the United States, there are countless formal and informal religious groups. In the midst of Japan's post-war boom, the new religions grew so rapidly that they have been recognized all over the world. In America today, religious vitality is so evident that if one has eyes to see, one can discover it even a block away from the campus of any of our great research universities.

Modern society is supposed to liberate the individual and undermine the family. Yet in most of Japan's modern history the divorce rate had fallen and it is only now very modestly rising. In America where the divorce rate is high, people still desire to marry and most divorced persons remarry. Family size has declined in both societies and yet most people want children and have children. This is not to say that all is well with the family, but it is certainly not the case that the family is dead in either society.

In short, the moral texture of social life continues to exist with remarkable resilience in both societies. Both Americans and Japanese work hard, though sometimes in different ways not recognized by the other, and that work continues to have a moral meaning in terms of religious, ethical and social ideas that have some continuity with earlier stages of our history. Religion in both societies has played the role of keeping the individual from being completely isolated, has checked an unprincipled pursuit of self-interest, and has reinforced a whole pattern of ethical practices which have made for a viable and effective society. In these ways religion has counteracted the materialistic and individualistic implications of our modern economy. Religion has, indeed, helped keep alive the impetus toward economic growth by helping to prevent the economy from destroying the social ecology necessary for even the economy to operate.

At least it has done so in part. Perhaps better in Japan than in the United States. But even in our two relatively successful societies there are everywhere signs of unease. Will

economic growth never end? Will we be pressed into ever harsher competition just to survive? Will the natural resources of our planet sustain unending economic growth? Is the meaning of life to be found in making more and more money and buying more and more things? Even if in a few societies economic growth and social vitality have gone hand in hand, are there not signs of danger? Are technical advance and economic growth finally monsters that will consume everything they touch? Some science fiction writers have imagined that we will create computerized robots that will finally be smarter than we are and so they will end up keeping us human beings as pets. This is a kind of nightmare, but it may have a symbolic truth.

It is here that we have to face the technological revolution that seems to be rapidly overtaking us. Japan and America, relatively uniquely in an unhappy world, have done remarkably well up until now, even though signs of strain are everywhere in evidence. But now the rules of the game are rapidly changing. Technological advance, computerization and robotization are creating new conditions in our economic and occupational life that require massive adjustments. At the beginning of the industrial revolution, we had much of our religious and moral heritage intact and they have stood us in good stead subsequently. But now we may be at the beginning of an even greater transition with a heritage that is much more battered and uncertain than once it was.

For one thing, American religious life has lost its traditional center. The great traditional Protestant denominations and even the Catholic Church are having difficulty maintaining the loyalty of their members, particularly in attracting the younger generations to full and active participation, something not unknown even in the Buddhist Churches of America. Among better educated and more affluent Americans, there has been a falling away from religion to some extent. Some of these people are largely secular in outlook. Others are sensitive to a wide array of spiritual

currents, some of them quite bizarre. But while the liberal churches that have been so close to the heart of American culture and society are weakening, a militant conservative piety is making itself felt. Based on social classes and sections of the country that have long felt excluded from power, these newly expanding, conservative religious groups are anxious to be heard. Their point of view is not very sophisticated and consists of a severe critique of some aspects of modernity and an uncritical acceptance of others. In any case they are more a sign of the deep unease about where our society is going than an answer to it.

Together with religion, work has long been a key element in American identity. But although Americans still work hard and still have one of the world's most productive economies (it is only compared to Japan that we do badly) there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with work. As many as 75% of Americans are dissatisfied with their work and the chief complaint is that it is not "meaningful".

With respect to family life the legitimacy of traditional obligations has been undercut by an ethic of self-expression and self-fulfillment. This contains in part a wish for a more intense and intimate form of marriage and family but it often places such a burden on relationships that it leads to separation and divorce. Many Americans are not sure what it is fair to ask of others and how much they should think first about themselves.

Disillusion with the political process is widespread and many Americans have withdrawn from public participation, even the minimal act of voting. Others continue to maintain what is, compared to most countries, a vigorous voluntary associational life. Yet discouragement and withdrawal among those who have been most active are widespread.

I do not wish to paint a picture of breakdown. That would be untrue. But widespread uncertainty, unease and a certain

anxiety characterize American society today. Our conservative leadership has been asserting loudly that our period of national doubt is over, but the sound is very hollow, particularly of late when doubts about our present leadership have become troubling indeed. Just beneath the surface we see the continuous erosion of all those social practices, and the religious and ethical ideas that informed them, upon which the success of American society has been based. Declining productivity, declining investment, high indebtedness, lack of confidence in our foreign policy, all of these things are mere surface indicators of deeper problems. They do not bode well for our making a creative response to a major new challenge, the technological revolution.

Can we say that the Japanese are better prepared to meet this new challenge? Certainly the doubts and uncertainties that afflict most of the advanced nations are muted and hard to detect in Japan. Japan has experienced forty years of astounding success. From the rubble and ashes of total military defeat in 1945, Japan has become by the eighties the most economically dynamic and successful nation in the world, viewed by many, certainly in the United States, as the very standard of modernity. Comparative statistics prove that Ezra Vogel's claim that Japan is No. 1 is not in vain. Yet as usual in history, that very success is not without its ironies. There is, of course, the obvious economic danger in being too successful. No nation is more dependent on foreign trade than Japan. In a period of great economic uncertainty around the world, there is a danger that a new economic protectionism might arise. Even if this does not materialize, competition coming from the more recently developing Pacific rim economies is growing. Japanese profit margins are falling. A sense that an already heavily mobilized nation must mobilize still more has appeared.

Even now, work discipline and hours are excessive by the standards of most other nations. Unions are in collusion with management (unions are organized by company

rather than by industry and leaders sometimes sit on boards of directors) to increase output even when pressures on workers become inhuman. Genuine opposition in a Japanese union is virtually impossible. Under these circumstances, we may understand why Lech Walesa, leader of Solidarity and spokesman for Polish workers, said of Japan that it may be a spiritual dead end. And Ronald Dore reports that British workers when they learn that Japanese workers work on the average two- or three-hundred hours more per year than they do, tend to say that they don't want to compete with Japan.

A second source of strain is the educational system and the way young people are inducted into the Japanese economy. Certainly this must be the most demanding and competitive educational system in the world. It produces public and private bureaucracies staffed by the best and the brightest, but the human cost is high. Winston Davis has recently described the cost in vivid terms:

No better example of the triumph of economic goals and values could be given than contemporary Japanese education. The costs of development, initially borne by women and peasants, now rest most heavily on school-age children. Over the years, the Japanese have developed an examination-based meritocracy to supply industry with the kind of "human capital" it needs . . . To realize the bureaucrats' dream of making the twenty-first century the "century of Japan," the Japanese have, in effect, chained their own children to the walls of Weber's "iron cage." Some children spend as much time at their desks at school and in *juku* (after-school tutoring or "cram" schools) as English children did at their workbenches in the early nineteenth century. This system of "education" is probably the main cause of one of the country's most serious problems, violence in the home and at school.<sup>2)</sup>

In short, the Japanese response to the challenge of the technological revolution and the new competitive pressures in the world economy is not to innovate but to redouble the efforts that have been so successful in the past. Strains that are already very apparent in the United States, such as technological unemployment and job polarization, are appearing in Japan as well. If the children of the American middle class begin to wonder if they will ever attain their parents' standard of living, so is it the case in Japan. Japan is one of the few other countries where the single-family home is of great symbolic importance to the middle class, if anything even more so than in the United States, yet the relative cost of housing in Japan is far more prohibitive for the average salaried employee than here. We are beginning to see an economy divided between a few good jobs and many low-paying jobs going nowhere, but the Japanese economy shows the same bifurcation. The problem of job polarization in our own society is summed up in the vivid image of the upscale shopping malls where affluent young professionals buy incredibly expensive goods from other young persons who are making four or five dollars an hour. This suggests modern feudalism with a few lords and ladies and many serfs. In view of the American dream and the American hope one can only see that scenario as a recipe for profound social and political unrest, and the Japanese parallels are striking.

Yet we can glimpse possibilities quite different from those that seem to be closing in on us. A society in which robots working 24-hours-a-day seven-days-a-week can produce with little human effort goods that used to take thousands of man-hours of blood, sweat and toil to produce is a potentially liberating society, not one that must produce job polarization, impoverishment and despair among most of its citizens. A shorter work week, sabbaticals for everyone in which people could not only "retrain" but also grow intellectually and spiritually, a revival of craft skills that are inherently fulfilling, a public life rich in amenities that would encourage public

happiness and public friendliness, these are among the possibilities that our new technological achievements open up.

So, finally, we can ask whether religion can make any contribution to the way in which our societies handle the challenge of the technological revolution. Are they, too, so wedded to old patterns that they cannot help us take advantage of new opportunities? I have already discussed these problems in the final chapter of *Habit of the Heart*.<sup>3</sup> Here let me only say that the Catholic bishop's pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*,<sup>4</sup> makes an enormous contribution not only in its policy suggestions but even more in its theology. What we need to learn, in the words of the letter, is that "human life is essentially communitarian." No amount of private accumulation or dreams of such accumulation will save us from our essential emptiness. We will find ourselves only in giving to one another and in concern for the whole world. That of course is simply what the gospel says but perhaps it is the essential message that will help us avoid one more frenzied round of competition, that could well be our last.

But here I want to consider the possible contribution of Buddhism, particularly Pure Land Buddhism, to clarify our situation. I will rely heavily on an article by Professor Minor Rogers,<sup>5</sup> growing out of a talk he gave in 1985 to the Federation of Buddhist Women's Organizations, and in which Professor Rogers placed *Habits of the Heart* in the context of Nembutsu thought.

Rogers follows the authors of *Habits* in finding that individualism has come to be a central issue in our society. But it is very important what kind of individualism it is. *Habits* speaks of an ethical individualism, based on the belief in the dignity and indeed sacredness of human beings, that Rogers calls an "Other-power" individualism, translating this into Shinran's view of reality. But there is also a widespread form of individualism in American that assumes the individual has a

primary reality over against society, and all social relationships are seen as only a means for individual gratification. Rogers translates this kind of individualism as a "self-power" individualism, in which the individual believes himself to be more real and more valuable than any group or relationship. This conception of individualism goes back at least to Emerson, whose idea of "self-reliance" is an almost pure expression of "self-power." But today, Rogers argues, agreeing with the authors of *Habits*, that this second kind of individualism has become cancerous and threatens to destroy the very social fabric of American life. Rogers writes:

Such a dark analysis of our society or any society is to be taken seriously . . . On the other hand, this analysis may not be cause for dismay to those of you living out of Shinran's visions that this is the age of *mappō*, a degenerate age controlled by the illusion that we as individuals have some power of ourselves to help ourselves; an age in which the *dharma* can be neither taught nor practiced in a traditional sense, and is no longer efficacious for salvation for those relying in any measure on their own efforts; an age in which our only recourse as foolish beings (*bonbu*) is the saving power of Amida's Primal Vow. In any event . . . Professor Bellah and his colleagues . . . raise fundamental questions about life in America today to which, I believe, Shinran's Nembutsu provides answers—in other words, Shin Buddhism as a way of life offers a devastating critique of self-power individualism and provides vital resources for reawakening a commitment to the very best of humane values in American life. . .

Too many of us in America today . . . are constrained by a language of self-power individualism; we are incapable of explaining the deepest commitments that truly define our lives; to



that extent, the possibility of commitments beyond our own self-interest is seriously called into question. Bellah's analysis, however, is not entirely pessimistic, for he hears in the language of our religious communities—which he calls communities of memory—resources for reworking deeper levels of commitment. In his study, he takes up primarily the resources of biblical . . . and civic republican language . . . However, it is clear to me that comparable resources are available in the Buddhist tradition of Shinran, Rennyo, and Shinshu *myōkōnin*.

Professor Rogers worries lest his analysis be understood as subordinating the teaching of the Buddha-dharma to any sociological or psychological or even historical consideration. The true teaching is to be found in the sutras and the commentaries, and the writing of Shinran and Rennyo, and in the lives of countless lettered and unlettered *myōkōnin*. It is simply: "We are to discard—to throw away—every kind of self-power endeavor and rely singlemindedly and wholeheartedly on the saving grace of Amida Buddha alone. What matters is not an individual's success; what matters is living naturally (*jinen ni*); what matters is living free of calculation and self-designing (*hakarai nashi*)."

Yet Professor Rogers believes, and I believe, that the living tradition of Nembutsu thought can make a major contribution to deflecting us from our fanatical pursuit of self-power, our preoccupation with the "competitive edge," that seems so destructive in both Japan and the United States. Certainly the need for Nembutsu teaching would seem to be great in Japan as well as in the United States. In Japan the reliance on self-power may be more collective than in America, but it is just as extreme. The Japanese have had a longer history of exposure to the "Other-power" teaching, but they are in no less need of it again today. What is certain is that both societies need creative centers of Buddhist

studies where the applications of Pure Land teachings to our present need can be worked out. Such institutions as the Institute of Buddhist Studies need to be nurtured and strengthened so that they may contribute to the religious conversation that is so necessary today.

Near the end of his talk, Rogers said:

The real point, however, is that there is no conclusion to the dynamic, living tradition of Shinshu in which you are participants. It is a tradition new every morning, which each of you redefines as you go about living each day. To the extent that we are open—or are opened—to the truth of Amida's Primal Vow and the nurture of his wisdom and compassion, we transcend naturally the self-power individualism that so threatens American life today; further, we move, or are moved, beyond a definition of success as narrow self-interest and preoccupation with self-cultivation and self-expression to compassionate concern for all sentient beings.

Rogers suggests the transforming power that faith can have in our lives. It is easier to see it in our personal lives than in the life of our society as a whole or in the modern world as a whole. But I believe we are called to ask those larger questions. What would it mean if religion set the ends, and the means that have usurped the status of ends—wealth and power—were reduced to the status of means again? Can we imagine a world in which the technological revolution might make it possible for compassionate concern to be the pattern of our actual lives?

Wassily Leontieff, the Nobel Prize winning economist, gave an instructive parable at a conference that I attended a few years ago on Japan's technological and economic challenge to the United States. He said that when the English first went into the tropics

they found the country to be very rich. They established plantations and offered wages but no one came to work. The natives could pick a few bananas from their trees and spend the rest of the day in religious ceremonies. Why should they work? Then the English levied a tax, and made it payable in money, not in bananas. So the natives had to come to work to pay their taxes. Modernity, if we want to think of it that way, places a tax on all of us, and it is a very high tax. We are all working in various plantations even though many of us might rather be spending our time in religious ceremonies.

Leontieff made another point in his remarks. Technological unemployment is bound to increase with ever greater speed as we close the century. Competition is forcing it all over the world. What will happen? This could be the great crisis of modernity from within. What will we do when an economy more and more productive employs fewer and fewer people? One can see very dark possibilities, forms of control and tyranny worse than any we have known before. But there is also a possible benign outcome. Could our economy become our banana trees? Could it release us from ceaseless toil to find

the meaning of life in religion where most of the human race has always believed it to be? Could the Japanese and the Americans lead the world in that new direction?

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#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion*, Free Press, 1957 (paperback edition with new preface, Free Press, 1985), p. 118.
2. Winston Davis, "Religion and Development: Weber and the East Asian Experience," in Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Understanding Political Development*, Little, Brown, 1987, pp. 266-267.
3. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tiptin, *Habits of the Heart*, University of California Press, 1985.
4. *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 1986.
5. Minor L. Rogers, "Nembutsu and Commitment in American Life Today," *Pacific World*, New Series, No. 2, 1986, pp. 22-30.