

Shin Buddhist Studies and Secularization

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I

The year 1989 marked the 350th anniversary of the founding of Ryukoku University in Kyoto, Japan. Among the various activities and events which were held at Ryukoku to celebrate that occasion was an international symposium on Shin Buddhist Studies entitled, "Shinran and the Contemporary World." Three scholars from Harvard University, which also has a history spanning 350 years, were invited to be the guest speakers at the symposium. A keynote lecture on "Internationalization of Shin Buddhist Studies" was presented by Dr. Masatoshi Nagatomi, who is also the president of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Scholars.

Nagatomi's address contained many important suggestions. In particular, he raised questions regarding the very foundation of Shin Buddhist Studies (*shinshugaku*) itself—questions which are required in this contemporary world. He stated,

Is *shinshugaku* a "theological" enterprise intent on unfolding the significance of Shinran's religious insight not only within the context of its roots in Buddhist and cultural history but also from the perspective of the religiously plural world of today? Or is *shinshugaku* primarily an exegetical discipline within the boundaries of sectarian dogmatic orthodoxy? If it happens to be both, then how are they reconciled and mutually integrated?

The tasks which challenge Shin Buddhist Studies today lie not only in its methodological procedures, but also in its perspectives on religious insight. Traditional Shin Buddhist Studies has to some extent incorporated into its methodological procedures certain objective and pragmatic ap-

proaches, such as those found in modern historical science and philology. However, it must be said that the study of Shin Buddhism is more than a mere objective or pragmatic investigation. The main purpose of Shin Buddhist Studies is to manifest Shinran's original experience; that is, it is to delve into the essential meaning of the Shin Buddhist teachings which gave rise to various historical occurrences, as well as to textual compositions. Moreover, it is necessary for those who are engaged in such research to approach the teaching subjectively and also participate in that basic religious experience themselves, in the midst of today's religiously plural world.

In this sense, I believe Shin Buddhist Studies should not be limited to dogmatic sectarian orthodoxy; thus I take the stance of integrating positions one and two as set forth by Nagatomi. But his question remains: *How* are they to be reconciled and mutually integrated? I will attempt to address that question now in the context of the issue of secularization. First, I will look at the secularization of contemporary society and the meaning it holds for Shin Buddhist Studies. Next, I will examine the present condition of Shin Buddhist Studies and make a few methodological suggestions.

II

Secularization is a common problem faced by all religions in the world today. There is, however, no agreement among them as to how it should be defined. In other words, it is a term used with various implications and no precise definitions.

The term "secular" itself first appeared in the Agreement of Westphalia in 1648, where it was used in reference to the transfer of church property

to the government. Its initial usage, therefore, was in the context of the political relationship between church and state. Traditionally, religion in the West interpreted this relationship as that existing between the sacred and the secular. In the eighteenth century, under the influence of the philosophy of the enlightenment, the term "secularization" came to refer to nonreligious authority. By the nineteenth century, it had expanded beyond the political sphere to include both culture and philosophy. What this signaled was the end of religious dominance of church and theology over human affairs—a trend of thought often referred to as "secularism."

In the twentieth century, "secularization" became a convenient term for sociologists, who focused on the relationship between religion and society when analyzing changes in the social structure. Here, secularization became a key-concept in explaining those changes which had taken place. That is, the implication of contemporary socio-cultural changes on man's religious aspirations and expressions were formulated in terms of secularization.¹ At this point, religion was no longer viewed as the force shaping society, but rather as one of the many forces in society. Furthermore, the territorial sphere of religion was seen as being limited to an individual's inner spiritual life. Thomas Luckmann, an American sociologist, labeled this phenomenon, "invisible religion." While sociologists looked upon secularization as being indicative of the progress of society, traditional religious institutions, on the other hand, tended to view it negatively. The Christian church regarded it as a crisis, equating it with the decline of religion (i.e., Christianity) and the advent of an atheistic world.

Rudolph Bultmann, a German Protestant theologian, approached the issue of secularization from a different (a theological) perspective. According to Bultmann, secularization is a result of man's objectification of the world through reason and rational thinking. He called secularization

man's rational interpretation and control of the world by means of modern technology and the accumulation of historical knowledge. Through secularization, man has been liberated from superstitions and fatalistic views of life. But at the same time it has given rise to man's arrogance, that is, to his attempt to control the world as he wishes. The former is a positive aspect of secularization whereas the latter is negative. Based on such an understanding, he examined Christian faith in modern contemporary society.

God, in Bultmann's eyes, remained a transcendental existence. However, Bultmann stressed that God's transcendental quality is not found in another world, as was the usual, traditional Christian understanding, but in this world. He saw this as an inevitable consequence of a Christian faith centered on the Bible in a time of secularization. It is not the Bible, according to Bultmann, that provides us with answers; rather, the Bible constantly asks us to raise questions. The answers, he said, come from none other than ourselves. Christian faith, centered on the Bible, was seen as being based on a continuous dialogue between the Bible and its reader.

Here, Bultmann advocated the demythologization of the Bible. Myth-like expressions found in the Bible do not represent fact, he said, but rather manifest man's understanding of the world. Thus, these expressions ask each person in every period to reinterpret existentially their meaning. However, Bultmann pointed out, the hermeneutical ground does not lie within human reason, for such reasoning would lead to nihilism. In other words, the hermeneutical ground extends beyond mere human reason and lies in the dialectical relationship between human reason and the Bible. Bultmann's theory caused a sensation in the Christian world, for it shook the core of traditional Christian faith.

The above is just a brief summary of the various, and at times conflicting, meanings given to the term "secularization" in the West. We have

seen that Bultmann viewed secularization positively, compared to the negative view held by traditional Christians. Also, in contrast to sociologists who tended to view secularization in the context of changes in the social structure, he understood it in terms of the relationship between the ultimate and the secular, or that is, the relationship between religious and mundane life.

But, regardless of whether secularization is judged positively or negatively, it is a crucial problem for all religions in civilized society, including Shin Buddhism. The question remains: How will Shin Buddhist Studies deal with this issue? Before I give some suggestions on the matter, I will examine the issue of secularization as it applies to Japan.

Careful attention must be given to the fact that, in medieval Japan, religion never developed to the point where it held any authority which transcended that of the state, as was the case with Christianity in the West. Instead, we find in the Japan a situation in which religion was made subordinate to the state. Accordingly, religious ultimacy and the secular realm never stood in the same sharp, mutual opposition as they did in the West. In particular, under the feudal system of the Edo period, religion was subject to strict controls and, in many cases, the ultimate realm of religion was limited to the inner sphere of individual, spiritual life. It did not impart any decisive influence upon the secular realm. One can note, for instance, that the Shin Buddhist notion of "the two truths of the ultimate and the worldly (*shinzoku nita*)" was also formulated from these circumstances.

We can see, therefore, that the limitation of religion to the realm of the individual's inner spiritual life occurred quite early in Japan. Yet, although this bears superficial similarity to a characteristic of secularization in the West, it is of clearly different origin. That is to say, the essential reason why this arose in Japan was not because of any change in the structure of society. Rather, the

essential reason why it arose was because the role of religion there was to support and maintain the prevailing social structure. Thus, there is some question as to whether the Western concept of secularization can be applied, just as it is, to the case of Japan.

However, it can also be said that, when Western culture and thought were introduced to Japan after the Meiji Restoration, the social structure of Japan underwent change and a condition similar to that of secularization in the West came about. Thus, in effect, the westernization of Japan played an essential role in bringing about a condition which can be called "secularization." A detailed analysis of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper and so I point it out now only in passing.

I would like to note, however, that changes in the structure of Japanese society which were brought about by the westernization process also gave rise to great changes in the bases upon which the Shin Buddhist sectarian organizations had been established. In particular, during the Edo period, the social basis supporting Shin Buddhist orders was the family system. However, with westernization, the family itself gradually lost its previously assigned meaning or role. Furthermore, the relationship between the Shin Buddhist sect and the general populace centered around rituals, such as services for ancestor worship and funerals. The process of westernization brought about the formalization of this relationship and gradually it became impossible to find any religious significance in it. It can be said that such "secularization" of Japanese society shook the foundations upon which traditional Buddhist sects, including Shin Buddhism, had been built.

Thus, we can see the unique character of secularization in Japan. At the same time, however, aspects of it can be said to be universal and common to all secular societies. For instance, due to westernization, many Japanese have come to hold views of the world or humanity based in natural science. However, such world views con-

flict on various points with religious views of those matters. This poses a huge problem for the question of religious truth, which is explained on the basis of such religious views. In other words, the fundamental question for religion is "What meaning does religion hold for us, who are living in secularized society?" In one sense, Bultmann can be understood as having tried to tie the two together theologically.

For Shin Buddhism as well, this remains a great task. That is to say, the problem of secularization demands a thorough-going examination of the operation of orthodox religious organizations, including that of Shin Buddhism. At the same time, it asks us the essential question, "Just what is religion for a human being?" How will Shin Buddhist Studies be able to answer this question?

III

As I have stated thus far, religion, particularly traditional religions, are squarely facing a host of problems with regard to the issue of secularization. When secularization is interpreted literally, as representing a change in the structure of society, then the role that religion traditionally carried out in society, that is, the function of religion, as well as the operation of the religious organization, both become problematical. Concretely, the relationship between religion and such things as secular authority, the state, ethics and civil society all become problems.

Moreover, secularization involves more than just a change of the social structure. It has in fact been deeply tied to modern rationalistic and positivist thinking. Secularization, in other words, has brought into question the meaning of the religious world view and, ultimately, it raises the question of the very meaning of religious truth itself.

How has Shin Buddhism responded to these kinds of questions? I would like to suggest

that two levels of attitudes exist in orthodox Shin Buddhist Studies. That is to say, the problem in the relationship between Shin Buddhist Studies and modern man has been apprehended as existing at either 1) a linguistic or 2) an existential level.

According to the linguistic approach, the reason why modern man has difficulty in understanding Shinran's teaching lies not so much in the teachings themselves, as in the manner in which they are explained. Thus, it is said, the problem can be solved with the use of words and expressions which are more understandable to modern people. On the other hand, the existential standpoint places great importance upon the existential question of how I, an individual in the modern world, receive the teachings of Shinran. That is to say, it attempts to understand those teachings in one's present existence.

These two levels are tied together and are very difficult to separate in the condition of secularization. Yet, it can be said that the more "conservative" traditions of doctrinal studies have tended to emphasize the former level, while the latter can be more often seen within the more "liberal" viewpoints, as well as those who approach Shin Buddhist Studies from the standpoints of philosophy or other "outside" schools of thought.

The traditional view has been that the teachings of Shinran or the Shin Buddhist teachings as presented in doctrinal studies, are already complete and perfected. That being the case, the modern doctrinal task is considered to be a matter of determining how to transmit the content of doctrinal studies to people using modern language. In other words, the issue for us is not the doctrine itself; rather, it becomes the way in which that doctrine should be explained.

In contrast to that, the position which considers the problem of secularization from an existential standpoint focuses in upon the existential question which the self apprehends, as well as the various problems of society. It might be said that Bultmann's idea of demythologization repre-

sented a compromise which attempts to solve the problem of secularization by taking it to be this kind of existential problem.

Needless to say, the problems facing Shin Buddhism are more than mere problems of linguistics. The reason is that, as I have indicated previously, religious truth, which religious language is trying to transmit, is based upon certain religious views of the world or humanity. Within the condition of secularization, however, people come to find these views difficult to accept. This is not simply a question of language or method of explanation. Rather, it is a problem of the transmission of religious truth—a question of what is truly meaningful for modern people today.

Moreover, it is characteristic of secularization that the significance of Shin Buddhist Studies itself is no longer as self evident as it once was. For instance, in actuality, Shin doctrinal studies are in no way perfect or complete. They always exist within history and possess their own history; they can exist apart from neither the history of the religious organization nor the history of doctrinal development. Even the more dogmatic approaches which consider doctrinal studies to be complete in themselves have a side to them which is historical in origin and relative in meaning. Thus, by apprehending the problems which Shin Buddhist Studies faces today as simply questions of linguistics or methods of explanation, one will overlook the essence of those problems.

What about the standpoint which considers those problems to be existential in nature? I have mentioned previously that the background out of which the condition of secularization arose was that of a change in modern man's perception of the world. However, it cannot be said that religious concern in the modern era has been lost, as it had been before. The reach of the secular realm has expanded within human life, with the diminution of the ultimate realm. However, human life itself has not become completely secularized as a result. Rather, religious concern continues to

exist, as the inner spiritual reality of each individual. The question has become how this concern can be fulfilled; and the answer reveals the kind of life that can be realized by that individual. In this sense, the point of view which understands secularization to be an existential problem is important. Further, it allows us to gain a positive understanding of secularization, which, as an existential problem, refers to an era defined by a perception that, "One must become a truly religious person in order to be a full member of society."

However, lying in wait here is the great danger of deviating from the fundamental, religious viewpoint. That is, when the ultimate realm, within the condition of secularization, does not give rise to an intense confrontation with the secular realm, the ultimate becomes totally dissolved into the secular. This means that here lies the danger that the doctrine itself will be dragged down into the situation and lose its fundamental significance. In particular, this must be given careful attention when one seeks to study the relationship between Shin Buddhism and secular society, the state, ethics, or civil society. Traditionally, in doctrinal studies, this issue had been taken up as the problem of "the two truths of the ultimate and the worldly." I will not go deeply into the content of that problem here other than to say that it contains many problem areas.

In that sense, the standpoint which apprehends secularization as an existential problem must hold within itself a critical moment. That is to say, more than anything else, doctrinal studies must be critical of doctrinal studies themselves; and at the same time, they must engage in an epochal criticism of present day society. In terms of the framework set forth by Nagatomi, this could be said to be the entry into a third standpoint which integrates and critically utilizes the positions of both traditional orthodoxy and doctrinal studies which seek to respond to modern day questions.

It can be asserted that this attitude was an important and essential element in the formation of

Shinran's teachings. In particular, it can be observed in his fundamental doctrinal standpoint, which is captured by his phrase, "neither a monk nor one in worldly life (*hiso hizoku*)."

IV

We find the phrase, "neither a monk nor one in worldly life" in the postscript of the *Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, where Shinran records the Jogen religious persecution. He states,

The emperor and his ministers, acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude, become enraged and embittered. As a result, Master Genku—the eminent founder who had enabled the true essence of the Pure Land Way to spread vigorously (in Japan)—and a number of his followers, without receiving any deliberation of their (alleged) crimes, were summarily sentenced to death or were dispossessed of the monkhood, given (secular) names, and consigned to distant banishment. I was among the latter.²

Then, he declares,

Hence, I am now neither monk nor one in worldly life. For this reason, I have taken the term "Toku" (stubble haired) as my name.³

Usually, Shinran's declaration that he was "neither a monk..." is said to refer to his protest against the persecution of the Buddhадharma by the secular authorities and the imperial law. At the same time, it is also said to be an expression of his intention to part from the conventional Buddhist religious orders which were being protected by those secular authorities. "Nor one in worldly life" can be understood to be his declaration that, even while existing within worldly life, his life was

based in the Buddhадharma.

However, it is not enough simply to interpret these words as being a mere statement of opposition to the historical event of governmental suppression. It has also been said that they point to a backdrop of problems which Shinran faced existentially, such as his inability to uphold the precepts, failure to abstain from eating meat, or taking of a wife. Yet, these words also speak of something beyond even this kind of introspective viewpoint. In other words, they do not simply point to the life of a priest who was "neither a monk" since he ate meat and took a wife, "nor one in worldly life" because he performed religious rituals while living in a temple.

Rather, what we find expressed in these words is none other than Shinran's own way of life, chosen by himself as he descended Mr. Hiei and settled upon the Nembutsu which he learned from his teacher, Hōnen. This was a way of life supported by a profound realization of himself as a person who was without repentance or shame, as well as by the joy over having encountered the true and real teaching. In this way, Shinran's phrase is a reference to Shan-tao's "two kinds of deep entrusting." The first is "deep entrusting as to the self," which is stated as,

believe deeply and decidedly that you are a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation.⁴

The second, "deep entrusting as to the Buddha's Vow," is set out as follows,

believe deeply and decidedly that Amida Buddha's Forty-eight Vows grasp sentient beings, and that, allowing yourself to be carried by the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, you will attain birth.⁵

Shinran gave concrete expression to this very profound religious spirit of the Pure Land Way in the sphere of actual life. This can also be seen in his understanding that the governmental oppression of the Nembutsu teaching was not a simple intervention of politics into religion, but also constituted the problem of religion compromising itself with secular authorities.

Reflecting within myself, I see that in the various teachings of the Path of Sages, practice and enlightenment died out long ago, and that the true essence of the Pure Land way is the path to realization now vital and flourishing.

Monks of Śakyamuni's tradition in the various temples, however, lack clear insight into the teaching and are ignorant of the distinction between true and provisional; and scholars of the Confucian academies in the capital are confused about practices and wholly unable to differentiate right and wrong paths. Thus, scholar-monks of Kofukuji presented a petition to the retired emperor in the first part of the second month, 1207.⁶

Furthermore, in the passage following the statement of his standpoint of being "neither a monk nor one in worldly life," Shinran continues,

I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sakyamuni, discarded sundry practice and took refuge in the Primal Vow in 1201.⁷

Here Shinran appends the character "Gu" onto the name "Toku," which he had said was a expression of "neither a monk nor one in worldly life," thereby calling himself "Gutoku". He also refers to himself as a "true disciple of the Buddha" and relates his own "turning of the mind" in 1201. In addition, he speaks of having been able to receive the transmission of Hōnen's work, *Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal*

Vow,

I was in fact able to copy it and to paint his portrait. This was the virtue of practicing the right act alone, and the manifestation of the decisive settlement of birth.⁸

We can begin to see in these passages the religious content of Shinran's declaration that he was "neither a monk nor one in worldly life." The words originated in a profound religious attainment that he expressed as "Gutoku" and which takes the form of a "true disciple of the Buddha" who dwells in the decisive settlement of birth even in the midst of the secular world. This way of life—being "neither a monk nor one in worldly life"—is founded upon the realization that "only the Nembutsu is true and real"—a realization which Shinran called the awakening of *shinjin*.

However, we must take note of an important point here. For Shinran, the human character in all of this was found in the self-realization that one is "foolish, stubble-headed." That is to say, the position of being "neither a monk nor one in worldly life" in the midst of the secular world is not based in the side of human beings, nor in human reason. Rather, it arises from the reality of living thoroughly within the ultimate world, while being in the very midst of the secular world. Thus, being "neither a monk nor one in worldly life" is to live a life in which the ultimate and the secular arise in tension, within the midst of the actual world. The Epilogue to the *Tannishō* states,

I do not know what the two, good and evil, really mean. I could say that I know what good is, if I knew good as thoroughly and completely as the Tathāgata; and I could say I know what evil is, if I knew evil thoroughly and completely as the Tathāgata. But, in this foolish being full of blind passion, and in this world that is a flaming house of impermanence, all matters without exception are lies

and vanities, totally without truth and sincerity; the nembutsu alone is true and real.⁹

According to this passage, the negation of secular values takes place in relation to the Tathāgata. That is, it arises from the realization that "the nembutsu alone is true and real" in the midst of this present reality. This is no transcendental conception of the tension between the ultimate and the secular. Rather, the basis for that tension is said to lie in the nembutsu within this actual world—in that religious way of life, having the "two kinds of deep entrusting" as its inner reality and finding expression in the phrase "neither a monk nor one in worldly life."

That being the case, within the condition of secularization, the mission of Shin Buddhist practitioners lies in clarifying the content of Shinran's words, "neither a monk nor one in worldly life," as living reality. It is constantly to ask oneself what it means to be a "true disciple of the Buddha" in the midst of this secular world. If, in the future, Shin Buddhist doctrinal studies should be conducted in the absence of this kind of tension between the ultimate and the secular, then our religious organization will gradually come to lose the dynamism of the religious life in which Shinran discovered the ultimate in the midst of the secular.

NOTES

1. Jan Swyngedouw, "Secularization in a Japanese Context," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 3/4.

2. *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way, A Translation of Shinran's Kyogyoshinsho*, 4 vols., Ueda, Y., general ed., Shin Buddhist Translation Series, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center), 1990, IV.613-4.

3. Ibid., IV.614.

4. Ibid., II.213.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., IV.613.

7. Ibid., IV.614.

8. Ibid., IV.616.

9. *Shinshu Shogyo Zensho*, vol. II, pp. 792-3. This translation is based on those found in *Tannisho, A Shin Buddhist Classic*, Unno, T., tr., (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press), 1984, p. 36, and *Tannisho, A Primer*, Hirota, D., tr., (Kyoto: Ryukoku University), 1982, p. 44. Emphasis has been added by the author.