

PACIFIC WORLD

Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies

Third Series Number 15
Fall 2013

SPECIAL SECTION:
Graduate Student Symposium



Appreciation and Appropriation: Christian “Borrowing” of Buddhist Practices

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INTRODUCTION

A word of introduction to begin this article. I come to Shin Buddhism with a background in comparative theology, a discipline which, from the Christian perspective (my tradition) can be defined as follows: “...the branch of systematic theology which seeks to interpret the Christian tradition conscientiously in conversation with the texts and symbols of non-Christian religions.”¹ So, as is evident in that definition, several things are critical for comparative theology to bear fruit: first, of course, is a deep understanding and commitment to one’s own tradition; second, and equally important, is a deep understanding and respect of another religious tradition; and third, the willingness to resist easy comparisons, reject any attempt at conversion, and evince a genuine openness to learning and transformation. Thus, my goal, as a Christian, is to engage in a substantive and meaningful way with the Shin Buddhist tradition, with the following goals: first, learning about the beliefs and practices of Shin Buddhism, and then second, asking critical questions of my own faith in light of that learning, which, ideally, leads to new insights and understanding of my own tradition.

CHRISTIAN/BUDDHIST “DOUBLE-BELONGING”

In the current American context, one could well argue that a Christian/Buddhist conversation is one of the easiest interreligious dialogues to begin, deceptively easy, in fact—at least from the Christian side. In my experience, of all the major world religions, Christians tend to be the most positive, the most receptive toward Buddhism. I am sure there are a variety of reasons for this, but certainly one of the most important is that predominantly, the way in which Buddhism is

understood and experienced in the West is as a kind of universally-applicable philosophy—a way of life, rather than a competing religious tradition. Practically, this means that practices of mindfulness, meditation, simplicity, and nonviolence often are easily and seamlessly incorporated into a Christian framework; and without a deity that demands worship, a single sacred text that demands fidelity, or a creed that requires adherence, it is no surprise that the phenomenon of “double-religious belonging”—when one person holds dual religious identities, claiming to be an adherent of two different religions simultaneously—seems to occur most often with Christianity and Buddhism (rather than, for example, Christianity and Islam), with Christians embracing this identity most exuberantly.

Perhaps the most well-known example of this phenomenon can be found in the writing of Paul Knitter. Knitter, a self-described “Buddhist Christian” rather than a “Christian Buddhist”—it makes a difference which word is the adjective and which is the noun—writes, “Buddhism has enabled me to make sense of my Christian faith so that I can maintain my intellectual integrity and affirm what I see as true and good in my culture; but at the same time, it has aided me to carry out my prophetic-religious responsibility and challenge what I see as false and harmful in my culture.”² He acknowledges that some may see this as “spiritual sleeping around,”³ but insists that his practice of Buddhism actually has deepened and strengthened his appreciation and understanding of the Christian faith—and, to his credit, Knitter has been a dedicated practitioner of Buddhism for decades.

While many Christians would not go as far as Knitter does in his practice of Buddhism, many individual Christians—and many Christian congregations as well—operate with the assumption that Buddhism can be easily mined for self-improvement techniques and attitudes that can be smoothly integrated into a Christian framework. Consequently, Christians attempt to appropriate aspects of Buddhism into their prayer practices and daily life, most notably a generalized understanding of mindfulness, an amalgam of meditation techniques, and even a distorted understanding of “mantra.” However, in most such situations, the practices themselves serve as little more than a “technology” as it were: as a way for Christians to enhance their own spiritual life with novel “tools” that are not seen as entailing any additional faith commitments that would conflict with Christian teachings.

The case legitimately can be made, however, that such practices are neither respectful to the specific Buddhist traditions and contexts from which they are taken, nor constructive for either Christian identity or Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the long run. In fact, this facile Christian appropriation of Buddhist practices and beliefs into a Christian framework creates a false sense of “double religious belonging” that does not actually do justice to Buddhism itself and the integrity that it has as its own religious tradition. In other words, the “double” in “double religious belonging” is, in many cases, in name only; in actuality, there is little understanding of what “belonging” to Buddhism might actually entail.

In my view, one of the main reasons why this attitude and practice by Christians can be so problematic is the fact that this sort of one-sided engagement is fueled, in many cases, by both implicit and explicit misconceptions about Buddhism. As I said previously, perhaps the most pervasive and overarching of these is the idea that Buddhism is more a humanistic philosophy than a religion—as that term is typically understood in a Western context; and consequently does not put forth any exclusive truth claims. (Incidentally, John Makransky—speaking from a Nyingma Tibetan tradition—emphasizes that while the Buddha did recognize a variety of spiritual practices and pathways, he also noted how many of them fell short of true liberation;⁴ and, in fact, the Buddha claimed that “superior spiritual paths lead to superior results, the path he taught being the one that leads to fullest liberation.”⁵) Unfortunately, these sorts of misconceptions are found not only in the public mindset, but in the language of well-meaning Christian academics, who, often with the best of intentions, seek to interpret Buddhism in familiar language, such that it can be better understood by Christians. This has had negative ramifications for Christians and Buddhists alike. Dennis Hirota notes that “similarities with Christian teachings have often led to fundamental difficulties in expressing and understanding Shin thought in the context of dialogue with other religions. Because Shin Buddhist statements about reality and human engagement with it have seemed so similar in certain respects to some Christian doctrines, it has been assumed that the conceptions of truth are the same, and therefore such problems as the nature of religious engagement or the ontological status of a supreme being are the same.”⁶

So, with all of that as background, then, in this article, I argue that Shin Buddhism in particular is vulnerable to such uncritical

appropriation, given several undeniable similarities that Christians have exploited, particularly the following: first, the description of Amida Buddha as God; second, the use of loaded Christian terms such as “grace” and “faith” to translate and interpret key Shin Buddhist concepts; and third, the depiction of human beings as “sinful.” I will briefly describe the way in which these misperceptions have been promulgated; and I also will suggest a counter interpretation for each, coming more directly from the Shin tradition itself, which not only protects against a facile Christian appropriation, but also suggests some constructive questions with which Christians might wrestle, and which have the potential to facilitate more constructive dialogue and engagement between the two religious traditions.

WHO IS AMIDA BUDDHA?

Let me begin, then, with the casting of Amida in the mold of the Christian God. The “Amida/God” comparison (indeed, the “Buddha/God” comparison) is well known, and has been promulgated by Buddhists and Christians alike—with, I would argue, varying levels of specificity and detail. Both John Yokota and John Cobb make this comparison, specifically with a theistic understanding found in process theology,⁷ while Gordon Kaufman suggests that Buddhists and Christians alike share an “underlying issue of concern,” which he frames this way: “Do not (almost) all of us need some sort of mythic/anthropomorphic conception of a God/Amida who loves/has compassion on us, and who draws us into a higher realm of life in which we too are enabled to live with compassion and care for all other creatures?”⁸

However, in recent history, surely the most prominent Christian to have commented on Shin Buddhism is Karl Barth, the preeminent theologian of the twentieth century. In the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth takes up the case of Shin Buddhism in his larger discussion of the revelation of God, in the chapter on “True Religion.” There he writes: “...as far as I can see, the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity [is]...the two related Buddhist developments in 12th and 13th century Japan... the Yodo-Shin...and the Yodo-Shin-Shu.”⁹ (“Jōdo” is, for some reason, spelled with a “Y.”) In that short excursus, Barth not only calls Amida Buddha “god,” but also calls him “the Creator and Lord of Paradise.”¹⁰ Even more, Barth’s use of language intentionally mimics the way Christians—particularly mainline Protestant Christians—describe the

saving work of Jesus. In describing his understanding of Hōnen's teaching, Barth writes, "We have to fulfill the one condition which [Amida] has attached to the attainment of salvation. We have to believe in Him, who has compassion on all, even sinners. We have to call on his name, and as we do so all his good works and meritorious acts stream into our mouths and become our own possession, so that our merit is Amida's merit, and there is no difference between us and him."¹¹

Several aspects of this description are problematic: for example, the use of the word "Creator" to describe Amida, which immediately suggests to undiscerning Christian ears a divine being who created the world—which leads to a further misconception of Amida's Pure Land as "heaven." Further, Barth's language also suggests the Christian concept called the "happy exchange," whereby Jesus Christ takes onto himself all human sin, wickedness, and impurity and bestows upon humans his own righteousness, faith, and sinlessness. And, finally, Barth's overarching characterization of Shin Buddhism as "the Japanese Protestantism" hardly helps things.¹²

More constructive here is a better understanding of the specific, particular claims about who Amida Buddha is, and what the "salvation" is to which the *nenbutsu* is oriented. First, of course, is the recognition that Amida Buddha was originally Dharmākara—a king who became a monk and made a vow to "become a Buddha...to save living beings from birth and death, and to lead them all to liberation."¹³ And, taking instruction from the Buddha Lokeśvararāja, he attained buddhahood, and created an incomparable land of light and bliss. This fact reminds Christians that a "Buddha/God" comparison does not work well on many levels; and one must take seriously not only the discrete existence of Amida Buddha, but also the concept of the "buddha-nature," which is the true nature of all sentient beings and is both manifest and attained in all times and places. A description of Amida and his particular work of liberation clarifies the distinctions here. Kaneko Daiei writes, "Under the pressure of existential suffering, we cry, so to speak, for salvation while calling the Name of Amida. But there is no hope of this need being satisfied from without by, say some savior god. The need is not the kind of need which can be satisfied in such a way."¹⁴ Instead, "we who have been calling Amida's Name for salvation now turn out to be the ones who, all the while, have been called by Amida to awake and take refuge in him."¹⁵

This leads to the second point of clarification here, which is the particular form that “salvation” takes in Buddhism. This understanding is important, first, because it is a reminder that Buddhism in general—and Shin Buddhism in particular—is not simply a humanistic philosophy, but rather a religion oriented toward the rescue of sentient beings. Daiei writes, “It goes without saying that, for all its profound philosophical systems, Buddhism is essentially a doctrine of liberation.”¹⁶ And, even further, in Shin Buddhism, that liberation has a very specific, very precise goal: simply put, “If we believe in the Original Vow of Amida, and say the Nembutsu, we shall become Buddha.”¹⁷ The point of the recitation of Amida’s name and the complex visual contemplation practices of Amida in the Pure Land are not simply for human edification and an improvement in one’s quality of life. Nor is it possible to just adopt the “idea” of such practices, substituting in some other “content”—like the name or image of Jesus, for example—and achieve the same result. Instead, “The Pure Land path leads to the attainment of birth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land through the nembutsu,” period. Thus, “The Pure land may be characterized as a teleological goal, then, for it is that to which one turns ultimately with aspiration and will, and that which is seen as holding the authentic fulfillment of one’s existence—one’s desires for wholeness and happiness—and indeed, that of all beings.”¹⁸

GRACE, FAITH, & “OTHER POWER”

When we turn to the description of human beings and their agency, it is clear that there are some complex tensions and nuances in the thought of Shinran around the relationship between the individual and Amida Buddha, and also the role specific practices play in that relationship. However, I would argue that when Christian theologians in particular—and maybe Buddhist thinkers, too?—use language of “faith” or “grace,” which are so deeply embedded in Christian thought, it creates more problems than insights, and suggests facile parallels that belie the different contexts in which these concepts are used. (Even the concept of “other power,” which, is not a specific term used in Christianity, suggests a divine power over and against a human power, more specifically, an omnipotent God.) Let me mention here just two of the problem cases: first, the idea of an opposition between “faith” and “works”; and second, the translation of *shinjin* as “faith.”

FAITH & WORKS

I have noted already in the writing of Karl Barth how Shin Buddhism has been interpreted by Christians as a kind of “Japanese Protestantism.” In particular, one of the most persistent comparisons in this vein is that made between Shinran and Martin Luther. In his article, “The Concept of Grace in Paul, Shinran and Luther,” Swiss theologian Fritz Buri calls both Shinran and Luther “reformers” of their respective religious traditions, and writes that “for each salvation is understood as being unattainable through striving but won only through trust in a divine power.”¹⁹ Key here is the emphasis on what Buri calls “grace as opposed to works.” Teasing out the parallels Buri sees in these two concepts, he writes, “Shinran’s radicalization of Amida Buddhism precisely corresponds to Luther’s assertion of *sola gratia, sola fide*....”²⁰ In my view, it is the “precisely” that is so problematic. For Protestant Christians, particularly Lutherans, this opposition between “grace” and “works” is code for a whole host of concepts around God, humanity, and the saving activity of Jesus Christ. Those words are so context-bound for Christians, it is almost impossible to hear them in a fresh way; and their use in this particular dialogue creates more impediments to understanding than pathways.

Another problem here is the emphasis in Christianity on “faith” being something outside oneself, foreign to one’s own being, while “works” are considered what one does oneself. (The concept of “alien righteousness” comes to mind, which is a specific term used to denote the “righteousness” that Christ bestows on a Christian in the sacrament of baptism. It is “alien,” because it is something that is not inherently a characteristic of the Christian herself; it comes to her from outside and is dichotomic with her own being.) The point is that “faith” in an outside power is needed, because what one can do on one’s own—“works”—are ineffective. So, for example, in the course of his argument, Buri makes much of the well-known saying “Even a virtuous man can attain Rebirth in the Pure Land, how much more easily a wicked man!”²¹ Buri concludes, “Good works are not necessary for blessedness, not even in the form of cultic practices, such as the recitation of the Nembutsu, for example. The recitation of the Nembutsu can, at best, serve for training in faith.”²² Implied here, of course, is that Shin Buddhism expresses the same mutual exclusion between faith and works found in Christianity—again, particularly in Lutheranism—such that a person must despair of her own ability to approach God

or participate in her own salvation in even the smallest degree before she is able to fully receive and appreciate the grace that comes from outside her as sheer gift.

Yet, it seems that this “external”/“internal” distinction is not so clear in Shin Buddhism, where an affirmation of one’s own inherent buddha-nature has been stated clearly by Shinran and others. For example, Gregory Gibbs writes, “The nembutsu is neither a means to attain enlightenment nor an expression of gratitude for the person of Shinjin. Viewed externally, it may have that significance, but for the person of Shinjin, nembutsu is the presence of the depths of Wisdom-Compassion in his or her life.”²³ Further, James Dobbins writes that “[Faith] is none other than the mind of Amida implanted in the believer.”²⁴ Even if it is necessary for Amida to facilitate this realization in the mind of the individual, the fact remains that what one realizes is not the true nature of a “being” outside oneself, apart from oneself, but rather the true nature of all reality, oneself included; and thus as one engages in the practices of Shin Buddhism—recitation and visualization—one comes to a deeper realization of one’s true existence, and the non-duality between oneself and Amida. As John Cobb notes, this is quite different from Christianity, where the “need to maintain the distinction between self and God to the end, even in the fullest and final attainment of oneness” predominates.²⁵

SHINJIN

The concept of *shinjin* is particularly important in this context, especially as it is so often translated as “faith,” which, as I already noted, has very strong, specific connotations in Christianity. Shigeki Sugiyama, however, notes that a more literal translation of *shinjin* would be a person’s “true, real and sincere heart and mind”; and, used as a verb, it suggests “to entrust oneself to the Buddha”—an act made possible by Amida’s own work.²⁶ Sugiyama notes the dialectic here between one’s own heart and mind and the heart and mind of Amida Buddha, having both a dichotomous identity and a non-dichotomous relationship.²⁷ In light of what was said previously, it would be profitable for Christians to explore this dialectic more thoroughly.

For this reason, the decision made in the Hongwanji Shin Buddhism translation series seems wise, where “...the use of ‘faith’ [to translate *shinjin*] has been discouraged because the term, ‘so strongly and

variously colored by its usage in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, would only blur the precision [sic] of the meaning of the original.”²⁸

“SIN” AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

The last point I want to raise—only briefly—is the negative state of the human being as described in Shin Buddhism, and particular in the writings of Shinran. Shinran, of course, recognized the profoundly hindered state of human beings in this declining, dark age (*mappō*). They require an easy path to enlightenment because they are simply incapable of mustering the effort on their own needed to follow a disciplined path of practice. Over and over, Shinran emphasizes that humans are “ignorant” of true faith, fully of depravity and evil, and mired down in this defiled world. Completely unable to extricate themselves from this situation, they require the power of Amida’s primal vow to bring them out of the darkness in to the light of Amida’s radiance and truth.

Often Christians, when hearing this description, immediately infer that what Shinran is describing is “sin.” “Sin,” of course, is another heavily loaded term in Christianity that carries with it two very specific meanings. First is the concept of “original” sin, which points to the belief that Christians are born sinners, and carry the weight of that sin regardless of anything they do or say: it is impossible to escape for even the wisest, most devout, most faithful person. Second is the concept of sinful actions, which Christians believe they cannot fully control on their own without the Spirit of God working in them. Sin, therefore, describes an ontological condition that requires divine action to transform. While, again, there may be parallels here between the teachings of Shin Buddhism and Christianity, the problem is that the use of “sin” casts Amida into the “Jesus” role of “savior,” and also presumes the same cosmological and anthropological framework for Buddhism as a whole, which it clearly does not share with Christianity. This, then, supports the (false) assumption that the same practices that are used in Shin Buddhism are easily transferred over to Christianity, where they can be put to use in the relationship a Christian has with Jesus, for example.

CONCLUSION

Certainly, I do not wish to deny that there are interesting points of intersection and similarity between Christianity and Buddhism, especially Shin Buddhism. However, the danger here is that Christians

all-too-quickly seize on these similarities, and use them to impose a Christian framework onto Shin Buddhism, and also justify an uncritical appropriation of Buddhist practices into their own Christian faith. This prevents a genuine understanding of Shin on its own terms, and also inhibits the possibility of Christians learning something new from Shin Buddhism, and allowing themselves to be transformed in the process.

In his article on Shin Buddhism, James Fredericks writes that “The point of dialogue is not to discover the truth of one’s own tradition in the tradition of another. This would be to domesticate the religious truth by finding in the other simply ‘more of the same’ (to use David Tracy’s phrase). Rather, the great promise of interreligious dialogue today is to discover a religious truth in the other that is not like the truth of one’s own tradition and to be enriched by this truth.”²⁹ Correcting the over-eager way Christians engage and appropriate Buddhist concepts and practices is one way to better facilitate this enrichment.

NOTES

1. James Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 68.
2. Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), xii.
3. *Ibid.*, 213.
4. John Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions,” in *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2008), 47.
5. Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism,” 52–53.
6. Dennis Hirota, “Images of Reality,” in *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*, ed. Dennis Hirota (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 34.
7. John Cobb, “A Christian Critique of Pure Land Buddhism,” and John Yokota, “Understanding Amida Buddha and the Pure Land,” in *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*, ed. Dennis Hirota (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 147ff, and 73ff.
8. Gordon Kaufman, “Pure Land Buddhism Today,” in *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*, ed. Dennis Hirota (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 141.
9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, The Revelation*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A.T. Thompson and Harold Knight, Vol. I.2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 340.
10. *Ibid.*

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 342.
13. “The Larger Sutra on Amitayus,” in *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, trans. Inagaki Hisao (Berkeley, CA: The Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), 11.
14. “The Meaning of Salvation,” 70.
15. Kaneko Daiei, “The Meaning of Salvation in the Doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism,” in *Listening to Shin Buddhism: Starting Points of Modern Dialogue*, ed. Michael Pye (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2012), 70.
16. Ibid., 61.
17. Kaneko Daiei, “Shin Religion as I Believe It,” in *Listening to Shin Buddhism: Starting Points of Modern Dialogue*, ed. Michael Pye (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2012), 47.
18. Hirota, “Images of Reality,” 42–43.
19. Fritz Buri, “The Concept of Grace in Paul, Shinran and Luther,” in *Listening to Shin Buddhism: Starting Points of Modern Dialogue*, ed. Michael Pye (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2012), 88.
20. Buri, “The Concept of Grace in Paul, Shinran and Luther,” 95.
21. Yuien, *Tannishō: Passage Deploring Deviations of Faith*, trans. Bando Shojun (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996), 5.
22. Buri, “The Concept of Grace in Paul, Shinran and Luther,” 94.
23. Gregory G. Gibbs, “Existentializing and Radicalizing Shinran’s Vision,” in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism: The Challenges of Jōdo-Shinshū in the Contemporary World*, ed. Kenneth Tanaka and Eisho Nasu (Berkeley, CA: WisdomOcean Publications, 1998), 269.
24. James Dobbins, *Jodo Shinshu: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 35.
25. Cobb, “A Christian Critique of Pure Land Buddhism,” 152.
26. Shigeki Sugiyama, “The Essence of Shinran’s Teaching,” in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism: The Challenges of Jōdo-Shinshū in the Contemporary World*, ed. Kenneth Tanaka and Eisho Nasu (Berkeley, CA: WisdomOcean Publications, 1998), 300.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 301.
29. James Fredericks, “Jodo Shinshu’s Mission to History: A Christian Challenge to Shin Buddhist Social Ethics,” in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism: The Challenges of Jōdo-Shinshū in the Contemporary World*, ed. Kenneth Tanaka and Eisho Nasu (Berkeley, CA: WisdomOcean Publications, 1998), 48.