

The Voice of Sacred Texts in the Ocean of Compassion: The Case of Shin Buddhism in America¹

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Exactly to the same extent as art and science, though in a different way, physical labour is a certain contact with the reality, the truth, and the beauty of the universe and with the eternal wisdom which is the order in it.

For this reason it is a sacrilege to degrade labour....

If the workers felt this, if they felt that by being the victim they are in a certain sense the accomplice of sacrilege, the(ir) resistance would have a very different force from what is provided by the consideration of personal rights. It would not be an economic demand but an impulse from the depth of their being, fierce and desperate like that of a young girl who is being forced into a brothel; and at the same time it would be a cry of hope from the depth of their heart.

—Simone Weil

PREFACE

WHEN I FIRST LEARNED of the theme for this symposium, I was both intrigued and a bit puzzled. What did this mean, “Japanese Buddhism in America”? Did this refer to a Japanese Buddhism that now found itself in America? A Buddhism in America that was somehow Japanese? The study of Japanese Buddhism by Americans? Whatever it might mean, this theme seemed to signify something different from other such phrases, less equivocal, as “Japanese Buddhists in America” or “Japanese American Buddhism.” It was difficult to know what to present for such a symposium when the theme itself seemed to be ambiguous. Eventually, however, I came to realize that the very ambiguity in the theme held a possible key to its significance.

The ambiguity, of course, lies beyond the merely grammatical problem of how to parse the phrasing of this theme. It lies in the juxtaposition of

"Buddhism," a religion with universal claims; "Japanese," with specific cultural, ethnic, and political characteristics; and its locus "in America," an idea, a concept, a land of contradictions. There are many permutations to the combination of these ideas; thus, there are many dimensions to this ambiguity.

This paper, however, focuses on a particular dimension of this ambiguity, namely, the function of sacred texts, which is central to Japanese Buddhism in America as it is in most religions. The discussion of sacred texts, however, requires further contextualization. Since Buddhism makes universal or global claims, issues of Buddhist life and practice, including those involving sacred texts, must be placed in a larger or global context. Thus, this paper examines sacred texts in the context of the global culture and global economy. As the author is most familiar with the case of Shin Buddhism, the function of sacred texts in American Shin Buddhism serves as the case study of this examination of Japanese Buddhism in America. Some of this may be particular to Shin Buddhism, but much of it is applicable to other forms of Japanese Buddhism that have become part of the story of Buddhism in America.

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In 1852 Commodore Matthew Perry was sent by the United States to engage in "gunboat diplomacy," to force Japan to open its doors to diplomatic, cultural, and economic "trade." From the latter nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, waves of Japanese immigrants were at first brought into Hawaii, and then a few decades later, the West Coast of the United States, as part of a labor agreement between the governments of the United States and Japan. The demand was for middle-class farmers who would work hard and adjust to the needs of the American labor pool. The Japanese government "agreed" to send laborers, at first from the Kanto area, and later from the southern precincts of Japan in Kyushu and Hiroshima, strongholds of Nishi Honganji, the largest branch of Jōdo Shinshū, or Shin Buddhism.

Due to these historical circumstances, the majority of Japanese immigrants to the United States belonged to Nishi Honganji, and as the population of immigrant male laborers increased and eventually Japanese women were allowed to join them, the need for religious community increased. In 1899, the first priests were sent by Nishi Honganji to minister to the Shin Buddhist communities in San Francisco.² In the ensuing years, North American Shin Buddhist organizations were established in Hawaii, Canada, and the United States as Honpa Honganji of Hawaii, the Buddhist Churches of Canada (BCC), and the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), respectively. During the century that constitutes the history of Shin Buddhism in America, these Shin Buddhist organizations collectively came to

form among the largest communities of Asian religions outside of Asia. My own life is inextricably tied to this history: my grandfather Enryo Unno and grandmother Hana Unno arrived in 1935 to serve as minister and “temple protector” (Jpn. *bōmori*) in a series of small congregations in California, eventually concluding their careers as the minister and *bōmori* of Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles.

This paper seeks to elucidate some of the key dimensions of sacred texts as they have come to function within North American Shin Buddhism. The narrative is presented in two parts, the first a conventional outline of the major forms that these sacred texts have taken and the second an examination of the notion of “sacred text” in the context of the global economy.

SACRED TEXTS IN AMERICAN SHIN BUDDHISM: A CONVENTIONAL OUTLINE

Canonical Texts: India to Japan

Traditionally, sacred scripture in Buddhism is identified with the sutras, the purported words of the Buddha Śākyamuni. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Buddhism of Tibet, Nepal, China, Japan, and Korea, the sutras were all composed at least five centuries after the passing of Śākyamuni, but they are also attributed to him. In Shin Buddhism, the so-called Three Pure Land Sutras constitute the orthodox sutras: The *Sūtra of Eternal Life*, the *Meditation Sūtra*, and the *Amida Sūtra*. In addition, there are key commentaries identified as the authoritative interpretations of the sutra literature. Shinran, the putative founder of the Shin tradition, identifies seven key Indian, Chinese, and Japanese commentators. They are akin to the Pauls and Aquinas of Christianity.

Within Shin Buddhism, Shinran himself is identified as the most important commentator, and as has often happened in Mahayana Buddhism, his commentaries and treatises have been raised to the same scriptural status as the sutras themselves, even superseding the latter as sources of religious authority. In addition, he composed hymns, his disciples compiled his sayings, and there are other documents such as Shinran’s letters which were compiled into anthologies and which he himself clearly intended to be vehicles of religious dissemination. The two most important works of Shinran’s own statements in present-day Shin Buddhism are the *Kyōgyōshinshō* and *Tannishō*. The first is a large six-fascicle work that articulates Shinran’s self-understanding in relation to Pure Land tradition doctrinally, historically, and personally. The *Tannishō* is a short collection of statements in two parts, the first those of Shinran himself, the second containing both Shinran’s statements and commentaries on them by

Shinran's follower Yuien, widely regarded as the compiler of the *Tannishō*.

After Shinran, the commentaries and other writings of the subsequent heads of Honganji continued to be treated as sacred texts, but none have attained the same status as Shinran's own words, much in the same way that the gospels have never been superseded by later interpreters in Christianity, and Jesus is regarded as the highpoint of Biblical religion over the entire span of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and subsequent Christian literature.

There is, however, one other figure who is seen as crucial to the history of Shin Buddhism in Japan, second only to Shinran, and that is Rennyo. He was the seventh-generation Abbot of Honganji, referred to as "the Patriarch of Revival" (*Honganji chūkō no so*), and is credited with establishing the institutional base of Honganji, the organizational source of all of the major Shin denominations in Japan and the West. His treatises, letters, and other writings have also been canonized as sacred scripture.

In the twentieth century, additional commentaries have achieved considerable prominence, but for our purposes it is more significant to note that new hymns were composed using Shinran's own words and set to Western-influenced melodies. In addition, in 1921, letters by Shinran's wife Esshinni were discovered and made public, identifying her as his wife for the first time, and establishing her letters as part and parcel of the sacred canon.

Canonical Texts: North America

As missions were first established in the United States and eventually the semi-independent Hawaii Honganji, BCA, and BCC were created, Japanese priests were sent from Nishi Honganji and the other Shin denominations in Japan to serve the American congregations. Eventually, most of the Japanese canon, including all of the above-mentioned sources, were translated into English. Earlier translations tended to be rendered in somewhat stilted English and Christian-influenced conceptions. Most recently, the critically acclaimed *The Collected Works of Shinran*, translated by a team headed by Dennis Hirota, was issued by Nishi Honganji in Japan, and copies were distributed to all of the temples of the BCA.³

In the twentieth century, American Shin Buddhist hymns were at first commissioned by the Hawaii Honganji and BCA. The earliest hymns were in fact composed by Christian hymnalsists and then later on by members of North American Shin sanghas. Both the melodies and words reflect these varying influences. The early hymns could almost be mistaken for Christian songs in terms of both lyrics and melodies. More recent hymns reflect a conscious intent to be more Buddhistic, although this itself remains problematic. No authoritative commentaries or works have yet been written by American Shin scholars or priests, which is also generally the

case with other forms of Buddhism. The work that has achieved the closest to canonical status in American Buddhism is perhaps *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, the recorded sermons or Dharma talks of Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center.⁴

Ritualization of Text

All of the Pure Land texts mentioned above continue to be important to American Shin Buddhism. They are objects of study, sources of inspiration, and the basis of the rituals that form the foundation of institutional practice. The manner in which the ritualization of text has shaped the contours of the Shin sangha in American religion follows closely what Catherine Bell calls the redemptive hegemony of the ritual order.⁵ That is, the ritual tradition is constituted in terms of a top-down hierarchy of economic, social, and ideological capital that draws on the past and continually reinvents itself through the ritualization and re-ritualization of the established canon as well as new additions to it. It is hegemonic in relation to the individual insofar as the structure of tradition as ritualization perpetuates itself as a social body.⁶ It is redemptive insofar as one is able to rise in the hierarchy through increasing mastery of the ritualized canon of behavior (where ritual mastery is to be construed broadly), and tradition, bound by the terms of ritualization, affords the individual a certain degree of protection from those outside of the ritual circle of mastery and literacy. Within the ritual hierarchy, moreover, one can gain various forms of power including economic means and even emotional satisfaction. Yet, no matter how high one rises within the hierarchy, one cannot attain any ultimate redemption since the corporate interests of the ritual body always outweigh those of the individual.

Bell's model of ritualization is particularly apt when applied to the case of Shin Buddhism. At the pinnacle of the ritual hierarchy stands the Abbot of Nishi Honganji, and he accrues a certain degree of social, ideological, and emotional empowerment through the reverence and symbolic power attributed to him, all of which is demonstrated and embodied through ritualization. In the case of the Abbot, institutional reforms set in place in the early part of the twentieth century largely removed his economic leverage on the institution. This correlates well with Bell's model insofar as it was not in the interests of the institutional or corporate body to place an undue proportion of economic capital in the ritual office of the Abbot. In terms of the daily, annual, and other periodic cycle of symbolic rituals, moreover, it is not always clear whether the Abbot controls the rituals or the rituals control the Abbot.

The divinity schools, seminaries, ritual offices, offices governing ordination, propagation, international affairs, and the like catalogue, train,

reproduce, and disseminate the tradition through rituals large and small, defining daily liturgy, events commemorating the life and death of Shinran, Rennyo, and other major figures of the tradition, and above all, funerals and memorial services which take place with a frequency and importance beyond what one finds in, for example, Christianity. A common complaint among both the priesthood and the laity is the physical and economic strain of memorial services that take place on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis following the death of a congregant for ten years or more. For this reason, traditional Japanese Buddhism as a whole is often described as "funerary Buddhism" (*sōshiki Bukkyō*).

The ritual protocol or orthopraxy of North American organizations such as the BCA is defined in Japan by Honganji. A majority of the priesthood in American Shin Buddhism have been trained in Japan, and even though the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), for example, is defined in its charter as largely independent of Nishi Honganji in Japan, it is doctrinally, canonically, and ritually still largely under the influence of the mother organization in Japan. Even today, much of the chanting of scripture, the centerpiece of Shin Buddhist liturgy, is carried out in classical Japanese and Sino-Japanese, even though increasingly, English translations are being used in parallel or in place of the Japanese versions.

The ritual hierarchy is reinforced by the fact that while learning, and therefore doctrinal and ritual mastery, is emphasized for the priesthood, it tends not to be so emphasized for the laity. However, Shinran himself tended to emphasize the virtues of the simple, illiterate farmer as being above those of the learned priesthood. This reversal of views has been ritually inscribed into the tradition, and into the minds and bodies of its practitioners in such a way that the gap between learned priesthood and silent, ignorant congregants has even increased at times. Even the Shin tradition of *monpo*, "hearing the Dharma," can illustrate this reversal when learned priests expound and lay congregations simply listen; thus, many Shin followers are unable to give even a simple coherent account of their own faith, partially because they are never expected to articulate it.⁷

Despite what from one perspective appears to be a largely hegemonic hierarchy, there is another side to this story. The entire ritual corpus including funerals and memorial services that commemorate institutional figures and deceased family members provide comfort, solace, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future. The sense of solidarity, social and cultural activities, recognition given for contributions, and consolation during difficult times are all integrated through the ritual activities of the temples. In this sense, ritual is not an instrument of control or power but an expression of community, connection, and compassion.

At the cynical or negative end of the spectrum, one might note that the very same congregants who complain about the expense of so-called

“funerary Buddhism” are not infrequently the same people who fret and worry over whether the funeral for their family member is sufficiently lavish and stately. At the laudatory or positive end of the spectrum, there are many occasions for genuine celebration and poignant appreciation, from the simple yet deeply felt liturgy of a funeral in a small, rural temple to the centennial celebration of the BCA attended by approximately three thousand participants from Japan and North America.

Furthermore, there have been ritual innovations unique to North American Shin Buddhism. These include the Bon festival involving traditional Japanese dance and food bazaars, and the performance of traditional Japanese musical forms including *gagaku* and *taiko* drumming. *Taiko*, in particular, has moved beyond the temple and Japanese American communities and become a larger cultural phenomenon, much the way that martial arts and Zen Buddhism entered the cultural mainstream in previous decades. The *taiko* phenomenon began in two places about thirty years ago: the Kinnara Taiko group was founded by Rev. Masao Kodani of Senshin Buddhist Temple along with younger members of the temple, and the San Francisco Taiko Dojo was founded about the same time by Master Seiichi Tanaka who came from Japan with no connection to Buddhism. Such has been the popularity of *taiko* that it has been reimported back into Japan where it has attained a level of popular participation that was previously unavailable to the general populace.

It is important to note that there are a growing number of non-Japanese Americans who participate as both ministers and lay followers of Shin Buddhism, largely white Americans. While the percentage tends to be around five to ten percent of the congregation, in some temples the majority are non-Japanese Americans. This increase in non-Japanese American participation has at times given rise to friction and contention between groups, but much of it has been energizing and helped to create a positive sense of diversity. This, too, has implications for the meaning of sacred texts.

Finally, one must not forget that unwritten yet implicit within this entire ritual structure is something like what Kathleen Norris has called “theology as gossip” with respect to the Christian congregations in which she has participated in the Dakotas.⁸ Shin Buddhism, both in Japan and in North America, has one of the largest associations for religious women, known as the Fujinkai or Buddhist Women’s Association, its tutelary head being the wife of the Abbot of Nishi Honganji. There are relatively few women ministers, yet the women of the Fujinkai, led by their own woman president for each temple, are responsible for a large number of activities, including the organization of conferences and workshops, musical performance, teaching and running Sunday schools, religious counseling, cooking, and serving. The women form their own sense of community whether it is in choir practice, in the kitchen, or at national and international Fujinkai conferences attended by thousands. In fact, the Fujinkai conferences are

consistently the largest gatherings within Shin Buddhism around the world. It is possible, even probable, that the BCA would not have survived without the Fujinkai.

Within these more and less formal settings, the women speak with one another about their deeper spiritual and personal concerns which may or may not blend with the larger ritual structures defined by the male-dominated hierarchy. Men also engage in some degree of "theology as gossip," but it is apparent that this is much more the province of women, and women are more adept in this regard.

At an individual level, however, ministers and lay leaders do provide pastoral and personal counseling to members. There is not much in the way of a formal setting for these one-to-one encounters although there are times set aside for such sessions at weekend retreats and study sessions that are held at a number of temples. When there are issues of pressing individual concern, revolving around some personal crisis or questions of faith, it is often in individual consultations that meaningful breakthroughs occur. These intimate encounters often occur outside the boundaries of formal ritualization, but they may provide some of the most vivid and creative moments in which the words of sacred texts come alive.

The system of ritualized and canonized text is hierarchical and hegemonic, from the headquarters in Japan down through the Office of the Bishop of BCA, the male-dominated priesthood, and lay leadership, yet it has nevertheless formed the basis for the continual reinvention and cultural adaptation of Shin Buddhism in its American context. Thus, it is also redemptive, and perhaps at its most intimate, the realization of Shin experience is liberative in a manner that transcends the limitations of the redemptive hegemony as defined by Bell.

"SACRED TEXT" AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

In considering the theme of sacred texts, two important questions must be pursued further: What is the scope of the term "sacred text," and what is the relevance of elucidating this notion with respect to Japanese Buddhism in America?

When this paper was first presented in Toronto, the panel organizers provided a starting point for the first of these questions, namely, that broadly construed, "text and textuality include various forms of expression, from the literary to the rhetorical to the political to the bodily." At first glance, this seems overly broad as it appears to include almost everything in human culture. It is reminiscent of the Derridean notion that there is nothing outside of text. Yet, it may turn out to provide just the point of entry necessary for considering the sacred function of text in Japanese Buddhism in America, in particular the case of Jōdo Shinshū or Shin Buddhism. That

is because it allows us to include the entire range of sacred expression as indicated in the foregoing outline.

As for the second question, one must begin with the problem of the relevancy of "Japanese Buddhism in America" as such. In the case of Shin Buddhism, in its North American context, this problem of relevancy is particularly important. The Buddhist Churches of America, the largest of the Shin organizations in North America, boasts a nominal membership of approximately one hundred thousand, making it one of the largest Asian religious institutional bodies outside of Asia. Yet its active membership most likely ranges in the twenty thousand to twenty-five thousand range, hardly a drop in the bucket of American religious life. This smaller number, moreover, represents at most a static population and more likely a gradually declining one, one that tends to be socially and politically retiring. On what basis shall we expend our scholarly resources on such a marginal religious grouping?

One obvious answer lies in the historical significance of Shin Buddhism as a moment in the pluralistic context of American religions: no matter how great or small, all voices must have their place if we are to piece together an adequate picture of American religious life. The first part of this paper may be construed in these terms. The more compelling response, however, may turn out to be that the life of Shin Buddhists has something important to tell us about the sacrality of American religious life as such. Not only can we learn something about how sacred texts work in Buddhism in America through an examination of Shin Buddhism, we may also learn something about the sacred through the study of Shin Buddhist textuality.

In general, "the sacred" or sacrality may be understood in two senses: as one commodity among others within the larger cultural discourse or as something that cannot ultimately be reduced to the terms of cultural discourse as a component of social, economic, or political capital. Of course, it may function as both a commodity within culture as well as something beyond or encompassing it, but this dual function can only be fulfilled if there is a dimension of sacrality beyond the finite bounds of culture. It goes without saying that any discourse is a cultural commodity, subject to the terms of negotiation and manipulation as well as serving to invoke and evoke the sacred. It is not the purpose of this paper to answer whether the sacred exists *sui generis*.⁹ Rather, it is to help clarify the conditions for the possibility of the sacred function of text beyond merely that of a cultural commodity. It is not necessary for the purposes of the present inquiry to establish the existence of the sacred as such.¹⁰ Yet, elucidating the sacred function of text is necessary for answering the question of Shin Buddhist sacred texts' contribution to the study of religion.

Although text can be defined broadly, we can see the value of defining the culture of Shin Buddhism through the lens of "sacred text." First, it

brings into focus the problem of the sacred—its cultural and religious significance—and its expression through text. Whatever else it might be, text has to do with articulation, in this case, the articulation of the intersection between the sacred realm and human culture. For it is through the clear articulation of this intersection that the significance of the sacred becomes explicit in our culture.

Shin Buddhism is a small minority tradition in a culture religiously dominated by Christianity; the majority of Shin Buddhists are Japanese Americans, making them a minority culturally and ethnically as well. The survival of Shin Buddhism in its North American incarnation depends on its ability to articulate its sacred or religious significance, certainly a major task. Yet, there is something in the corpus of its sacred textuality that speaks to this very situation. Historically, in its Japanese origins Shin Buddhism began with a small minority community led by Gutoku Shinran, an outlaw priest who gave voice to illiterate farmers and fisherman. In its early American history, its members were almost all illegally herded into internment camps during the Pacific War, forbidden even to congregate after they were initially released, virtually penniless. Today there are approximately one hundred temples and lay sanghas or communities in Canada and the United States, yet their members have become established in American society—as farmers, businessmen, professionals, teachers, and the like. Thus, the discourse of cultural marginalization and survival in its wake is integral to the Shin Buddhist narrative in Japan as well as North America. Many religious traditions have replicated in their American settings narratives of marginalization articulated during their formative periods, including, for example, the Puritans and their self-understanding as believers in Christ. This is certainly true for American Shin Buddhists who looked back to Shinran for sustenance in the face of great difficulty in a highly prejudicial culture.

The comparison with Puritans is apt at more than one level. Although the Puritans had previously experienced prejudice against their own faith, they became deeply implicated and involved in the persecution, exploitation, and eventual genocide of Native Americans that continues today. The story of the role played by Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic, in the oppression of Native Americans has yet to be fully told. Similarly, although Japanese American Shin Buddhists have suffered tremendous injustice at the hands of the dominant culture, they have not always extended their awareness of prejudicial treatment to a compassionate understanding of the plight and experience of other religious and ethnic groups such as Native Americans and African Americans. Their courtship of outsiders has been largely restricted to the world of white America. As Japanese Americans became more and more successful economically, they have tended to migrate out of lower-income neighborhoods to more affluent areas. Lower income African Americans, Latino Americans, and

other less affluent populations have tended to move into the neighborhoods vacated by Japanese Americans, and Japanese Americans in some parts of the country have tended to identify with policies that disadvantage the lower income strata of society.

There have, however, been important exceptions, just as there have been Christian groups that have become the allies of Native Americans and civil rights movements involving various ethnic and racial groups. Recently, Kinnara Taiko of Senshin Buddhist temple performed together with Native American drummers on reservation land, and Shin Buddhist temples have been largely tolerant of diverse sexual orientations and views on social issues ranging from abortion to assisted suicide.

The story of survival in the face of marginalization is embedded in the earliest Indian scriptural traditions on which Shin religious thought is based, and is invoked time and again through the development of the tradition in China, Japan, the United States, and now in small sanghas in Europe, Africa, and even India to which it has returned via its outcaste classes. Yet, this fact alone tells us nothing about the sacred status of its texts beyond or outside of their transmission and evolution within culture, as commodities and sources of capital for social, economic, and cultural survival. If we are to inquire into the possibility of the sacred beyond culture, another approach is necessary. And that is to place the expression of the sacred within the context of the global economy, for that is ultimately the umbrella under which all commodification currently takes place, including the commodification of sacred texts.

The global economy governs the function of sacred texts insofar as the existence of religious organizations depends upon their economic viability. To state the matter more concretely, as long as the members of religious organizations are unable or unwilling to call into question the possible implications of the global economy for the financial operations of their own lives and their own religious communities, all talk of the "sacred" and "sacred texts" remains bound to the terms of the global economy. Historically, whether in medieval or modern Europe or Japan, constitutional, legal, and institutional safeguards have been put into place to ensure the non-profit and non-corporate status of religious organizations, yet the actual operations of religious communities are often economically bound.

While this has always been true to a certain extent, the pervasiveness of technology, the interrelatedness of the global economy, and the invasiveness of ecological destruction makes it difficult to find a foothold of spiritual and communal independence and resistance against the negative aspects of the global economy. I recall one conversation with a former BCA temple president that addressed this issue.

He wanted to discuss the prospects for younger generations to provide spiritual leadership within the Buddhist temples and lamented

their preoccupation with economic success. This was not merely a criticism of greed but took into account that they have been raised in a time when the entire culture conspires to wed them to their finances, from the skyrocketing costs of health care to the need to plan for retirement accounts. He said, "You know, I think it's TV! When we were young, we were poor, but we didn't care. Now, the kids watch TV, and they think they have to have everything."

This exclamation is, of course, both naive and profound. In my response to him, I pointed out that being impoverished even fifty years ago was not the same as it is today. Even if one was poor, the global economy had not yet infiltrated the ecological system and the social structure to such an extent that one was oppressed by the pressures it exerted on body, mind, and spirit to the same degree as today. Perhaps it is not yet all-pervasive, but in many parts of the globe, to be poor means to suffer under the weight of the polluting effects of the global economy, a pollution that invades all dimensions of life.

Any discourse on the sacred that takes place under the sway of the global economy is like the text of the salesman's pitch that is uttered with a fake smile. The outer ritual and language of the sacred are there, just like the salesman's friendly pitch, but they lack the power to transcend the cycle of commodification. Of course, within the redemptive hegemony of the global economy, one might enjoy the goods offered by the salesman or the sacred texts at some level, and the salesman and priesthood may also be gratified by a pitch well-made, a deal closed effectively. But though tears may be shed, and laughter shared, there is a difference between a transaction carried out with sacred texts purely as a cultural commodity versus as a means of bringing to light the difficult intersection of the realm of the sacred beyond measure or commodification and the culture of the global economy. Even when resistance is catalyzed, in issues involving class, race, ethnicity, gender, ecology, sexual orientation, and religious pluralism, as long as this resistance is not based on an awareness of the insidious insinuation of the problematic dimensions of the global economy, these efforts at resistance remain within the commodified terms of the economy and become co-opted by it.

In a hegemonic system, those at the bottom of the oppressive hierarchy are often the ones who most clearly see and feel the depths of the hegemonic structure. They are in an advantageous position to catalyze resistance against the commodification of all life, including that of religion. Shin Buddhist religious thought and the experience of Japanese American Shin Buddhists offer possible venues for the articulation of this hegemony, of reading into the depths of the global economy and of evoking the voices of the sacred that originates beyond this world.

Yet, while this potentiality may exist within the sacred texts of Shin Buddhism, inscribed in the bodies of Japanese American Shin Buddhists

through such experiences as the internment, many Shin Buddhists have turned away from this dimension of their religious lives in order to seek assimilation into the dominant mainstream American culture, the culture that is most deeply implicated in the problematic aspects of the global economy. Japanese Americans inherit the legacy of the two most powerful, and thus potentially most oppressive, economies in the world.

Shinran lived in twelfth and thirteenth century Japan, a time when he and many of his contemporaries saw as the most spiritually and socially degenerate era of Buddhism known as *mappō*. It was a time when he felt it impossible to see the truth, since everything was filtered through the corrupting lens of the “degenerate age.” Similarly, it can be argued that we live in a time when it is difficult to see whether there is even the possibility of a sacred unfolding beyond the bounds of commodification. Such was the poison of the age that Shinran felt the corrupting influences viscerally, saying that they were “like snakes and scorpions” within his own belly. Yet, it is said that precisely in seeing himself for what he was, he was able to hear the call of the sacred, the voiceless voice of boundless compassion, of *muen no daihi*, unfolding from beyond the limits of culture, coming to him as the voice of the Buddha Amida, the voice that moved him to abandon the priesthood, respond to the authenticity of the peasants and fisherman who moved him out of the fake discourse of the sacred that he found and detested in the aristocratic and intellectual cultures of his time.

In many religious traditions, there is the idea that one must look into the depths of the problematic dimensions of human existence, both personally and socially, in order to tap the power of the sacred to liberate spiritually as well as culturally the life of all beings. In Christianity, there is the awareness of human sinfulness that is inseparable from redemption, in Taoism the recognition of disharmony that leads to harmonizing with the Tao. In Buddhism generally and in Shin Buddhism in particular, there is a focus on the awareness of destructive behavior, of karmic evil, which awareness enables the light of liberating compassion to penetrate into the depths of life as we live it.

Shinran’s own sacred texts from the thirteenth century by themselves are not sufficient to address the multitudinous dimensions of global culture today, and there are limitations to his own self-expressions due to the cultural parameters within which he conceived his own religious life. Conversely, there are sacred texts distinctive to American Shin Buddhism upon which its adherents may draw to articulate the intersection of cultural life and sacred empowerment. These texts are not merely passively received by and inscribed in the bodies, hearts, and minds of Shin Buddhists. Individual human beings are not merely passively socialized into a hegemonic hierarchy, however redemptive. Each person bears responsibility to articulate his or her self-understanding and to manifest this in daily life. It may be possible that the sacred text of Shin Buddhism utters itself in the

single blow of a *taiko* drum, a subtle hand extended in a moment of gossip as the Dharma, in an invisible movement of the heart in a one-to-one encounter. As an integral part of these moments, it may be necessary for American Shin Buddhists to reflect even more deeply on their own cultural history, to create a more diverse community within its sanghas—in ethnicity, race, class, sexual orientation, and other cultural factors, and even in some basic elements of its religious thought which may have been for too long filtered and interpreted for the corporate interests of its institutional hierarchies.

The difference between a purely political or socio-economic approach to the problematic dimensions of the global economy and one that is inspired by an awareness of the sacred lies in the resources and means of cultural transformation. The former draws solely upon what can be found in the visible world of culture; the latter may make use of cultural forms of expression but seeks to be inspired by something beyond the available cultural commodities. If it is true that the global economy, while remarkable in many ways, is headed in a deeply troubling direction, then it will take something more than the finite terms of cultural life itself to move against the tide. Only something like the sacred articulation of unhindered voices will be true to the terms of Shin Buddhist thought, of boundless compassion and indestructible life.

Whether there really is some sacred reality beyond the global, cultural processes of commodification remains an open question. However, this paper will have succeeded if it has stimulated reflections on what “sacred text” might mean within Shin Buddhism from the perspective of Japanese Buddhism in America. For in a sense, the reality of the sacred as articulated through Shin Buddhism depends not on the ability to substantiate in any intellectual sense ontological or theological claims. Rather the authenticity of the sacred depends upon the depth and awareness expressed by Shin Buddhists in their own self-articulation of “Great Practice,” where the text of this self-articulation is broadly construed to include all dimensions of life—of body, heart, and mind.

NOTES

1. This paper was first delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Toronto, Canada, November 25, 2002, as part of a panel on "Asian and Asian American Sacred Texts in a Pluralistic Context," co-organized by the Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society Group and SBL's Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics Group. It also formed the basis for a new paper, "Buddhist Self/Global Culture," at the symposium, "Japanese Buddhism in America: Shared Issues, Common Themes," co-sponsored by the Buddhist Churches of America and UCLA, February, 21, 2003. The present paper incorporates some of the ideas from this latter paper.
2. See Kenneth Tanaka, *Ocean: An Introduction to Jodo-Shinshu Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: WisdomOcean, 1997), pp. 89–90.
3. Dennis Hirota et al., trans., *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol. I and II (Kyoto, Japan: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997).
4. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).
5. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 114.
6. Ritual activity is structurally communal or corporate even when performed in isolation.
7. There are other reasons, however. In the dominant American culture, articulacy concerning one's own religion often assumes mainstream Christian notions of dogma and practice. As Shin Buddhism does not follow these conventions, problems of cultural and religious differences are also significant.
8. Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993).
9. In fact, such a question may not even be appropriate vis-à-vis Buddhism.
10. Which many have tried but where none have succeeded conclusively, to say the least.