



Kenneth Doo Young Lee, *The Prince and the Monk: Shōtoku Worship in Shinran's Buddhism*

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THIS EXTREMELY well-nourished work of scholarship (drawing on eighty-five primary texts in Japanese and one hundred and sixty-eight secondary ones) offers a flood of information on Prince Shōtoku (574–622) and the vast growth of his legend and cult in medieval Japan. Lee claims that Westerners implicitly regard this tradition as “a long web of exaggerated lies,” thus failing to appreciate “the mystery

and mystique that surround not only the emperor ... but also the Japanese people as a whole" (35). Yet Lee himself goes on to puncture this mystique by embracing Ōyama Seiichi's theory that Shōtoku never existed, and is even ready to entertain the idea that this "fictitious character" was "the focal point of a mass conspiracy that has captured and paralyzed the Japanese people" (135). Or rather he seems to say that history is irrelevant and that a legend of this order takes on a life and momentum of its own which does credit to the creativity of its inventors.

The *honji-suijaku* framework helps make sense of the proliferating legends, and even gives them a rational coherence. It represents a growing Buddhist appropriation of the figure, as opposed to earlier stress on his status as an imperial ancestor and kami (6). Shōtoku was identified as a reincarnation or *suijaku* of the bodhisattva Kannon in the tenth century. In time he himself became a *honji* with Emperor Shōmu, Kūkai, and Rigan Daishi as his manifestations (82, 135). Among the many instances of the transfusion of Buddhist imagery into the figure of the Japanese prince is the story that the baby Shōtoku kept his fist closed for two years; it turned out to be clutching a precious relic, the Buddha's left eye, as a crystal (90)! As early as 754 Shōtoku was seen as the reincarnation of the Chinese Tendai monk Hui-sso, a legend actively promoted at the Tendai headquarters on Mount Hiei, which sought links with Shitenōji (95), a center of the Shōtoku cult. Lee shows how leaders such as Minamoto no Yoritomo cultivated the Shōtoku legend to their advantage. Despite the wealth of Lee's exposition, or rather because of it, the reader may feel that the inner texture and rationale of Shōtoku faith or devotion needs further clarification and assessment.

Given the wealth of this proliferating tradition and its central role in Japanese religion and culture, it is not surprising that Shinran, formed on Mount Hiei, should have cultivated devotion to Prince Shōtoku. Lee claims that Shin scholars have overlooked this aspect of Shinran's religion out of a concern for doctrinal purity. Perhaps he exaggerates here; Shinran's devotion to Shōtoku is amply acknowledged in *Young Man Shinran*. Shinran encountered Shōtoku in a dream at Rokkakudō in Kyoto, and saw him as a manifestation of bodhisattva Kannon for the latter days and as his personal guide and savior. The phrase "personal savior" evokes associations with evangelical Christianity, and seems inapplicable here, if only for the obvious reason that Amida Buddha so clearly plays the supreme saving role in Shinran's thought.

I am not sure if the identification of Shōtoku and Kannon looms as large for Shinran as Lee suggests; the sources quoted on pages 18–19 speak simply of Kannon appearing to Shinran in the guise of a holy monk; another source tells us that Shōtoku worshipped Shinran (sic) as Amida's incarnation (20); and Shinran's wife Eshinni has a dream in which she sees Shinran himself as a manifestation of Kannon. One of Shinran's hymns embraces not only the tradition that identifies Shōtoku with Kannon but also ones that identify him with Queen Sṛīmālā and Master Hui-sso (24). I wonder if all these identifications and acts of worship are to be taken very seriously, or if the word "worship" is not finally too misleading in these contexts?

Again, one is left with the sense that a critical phenomenology could go further in clarifying what such language really meant in practice.

Shinran was not an intolerant revolutionary but adhered to the Buddhist philosophy of assimilation. His charismatic authority did not forgo the legitimacy that popular traditions provided. He cleverly used the Shōtoku tradition to “subordinate imperial authority to the superior authority of the Buddha” (125), by emphasizing Shōtoku’s identity with Kannon. “Shinran’s emphasis on Shōtoku worship thus played a vital role in legitimizing his innovative teaching even though it had been banned as heresy by *kenmitsu* Buddhism” (133). But perhaps in all this Shinran was merely building on the basics of Buddhist self-presentation and self-understanding in Japan, rather than pursuing a clever strategy. His own distinctive teaching was not thereby made more acceptable to the Tendai establishment. Rather than revolutionize our understanding of Shinran, Lee’s findings show how his innovative teaching did not make him a stranger to the wider Buddhist culture of his time. Lee brings out the Japaneseness of Shinran in an illuminating way, but at the risk of drowning the originality of his religious vision, which derives from Indian and Chinese sources, in a generic culture of Japanese mythmaking.

Joseph S. O’Leary
Sophia University