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BUDDHISM—JÔDO SHINSHÛ—CHRISTIANITY**
Does Jôdo Shinshû form a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity?

The Pure Land tradition or Amidism has been said with good reason, I believe, to be the least known of all the schools of Buddhism in the West. There are undoubtedly historical, as it were accidental, reasons for this, but a more fundamental reason might be found in the fact that the West is mainly interested in Buddhism as its antipode, partly in distrust of its own religious tradition. It is therefore most attracted to these forms of Buddhism wherein that antipodal character appears most clearly—Theravâda, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism. The Pure Land school, on the other hand, is perceived as very close to Christianity and far removed from the mainstream of Buddhism.

In this paper, this Western image of the Buddhist Pure Land school is put into question and, more generally, an attempt is made to come to a new approach to the question of the relationship of the Pure Land tradition to Buddhism on the one hand, and to Christianity on the other. Its real intention is to plead for a reconsideration of the Pure Land school as a worthy partner of dialogue and, consequently, a worthwhile object of study.

Status Questions

A good twenty years ago an intriguing phenomenon was pointed...
out by Douglas Fox: “Christian observers have often remarked on
the extraordinary similarities of Jōdo Shin and Christian thought,
especially in their respective concepts of salvation.... Yet, the idea
that there are striking parallels between the two traditions is
apparently offensive to many Shin adherents who take pains to
point out differences, real or imagined.” (FOX 1968, p.30) It may
be worth our while to have a closer look at this phenomenon.

First, on the Shinshū side, the wish to keep Christianity at arm’s
length appears to be, indeed, a rather common trait in writings by
Shinshū doctrinal scholars, at least since the end of the Meiji era,
and has all the earmarks of an apologetic attitude. Japan’s modern
history may suggest several explanatory factors for this attitude, but
the most relevant one for our present problematics, and possibly
the most basic one, might be the following. Among the Western
sciences that were eagerly adopted by Japan in the Meiji era there
was also the 19th century European “buddhologie” (Buddhist stu­
dies) with its concentration on the Pāli texts. Japanese Buddhism,
which had developed in centuries-long isolation from its Indian
roots, was all of a sudden confronted then with the question of its
relationship to Sakyamuni and “original Buddhism,” and had to
come to grips with the idea that “Mahāyāna is not the teaching of
the Buddha.” It is easy enough to imagine how, in that climate,
Shinshū people in particular faced the accusation: “Other-Power
salvation is not compatible with the self-relying spirit of original
Buddhism; it rather is something borrowed from Christianity;” and,
quite naturally, felt compelled to put all possible stress on the
opposite position. The case of the man caught in a love triangle
and protesting his loyalty to his lawful spouse while playing down
the seriousness of his involvement with his lover, while not sound­
ing very reverent, might be a fitting enough comparison.

A detailed analysis of this understandable apologetic reaction
might be called for at this point, but I have to content myself with
two further remarks. In general presentations of Shinshū doctrine,
one often finds the following pattern: “Christianity teaches this..., but Shinshū teaches that... (something essentially different).” In
most of these cases, however, what sails there under the flag of
Christianity is not anything I can recognize as my religion, but is
clearly a construct put up “pour le besoin de la cause,” i.e., as an
antithesis to Shinshū. Another pattern discernible in this attempt to
keep Christianity at a distance is more subtle. One starts out by
recognizing the similarities with Christianity to the full, but then
hastens to add that these similarities are, of course, exterior or
superficial, while Shinshū’s Buddhist traits are interior and essen­
tial. The eminent Shinshū scholar, Ishida Mitsuyuki, may forgive
me for selecting him here as my scapegoat for the “sins” of all his
colleagues. He wrote, for example:

I chose this sentence because I would completely agree with it,
were it not for the use of the words “superficial” and “essence.”

On the Western side, the stress on the similarity of Shinshū
and Christianity, or rather the often expressed astonishment at find­
ing very “specific” Christian doctrines almost literally in Shinshū
texts, needs no further documentation, I believe. In heaven,
Luther and Shinran must often have put their lotus flowers together
to exchange comments on this. And, to add a more personal note,
when reading the Shinshū “theologian” whom I am most familiar
with, Soga Ryōjin, I must confess that I often come across formul­
ations that express Christian doctrine in a most felicitous way and
are excellent food for my spiritual life. Nishitani Keiji is right,
however, that the Western appreciation of Shinran often betrays a bias that is apt to deform things.

When reading occasionally an essay on Shinshū by a Westerner, I get the impression that, for them, Shinshū is very similar to Christianity. At the bottom, there lies the conviction that Shinshū should be like Christianity, but does not fully get there because of its shortcomings.... Against that trend, Suzuki Daisetz defended the opposite position. Namely, that Shinshū and Christianity are extremely different, and that we must make clear to Westerners that Shinshū is straightforward Buddhism and is, on the contrary, more advanced than Christianity.... (SOGA 1978, pp.72-73)

Let us remember from this that both positions are biased and that the time has come for a more objective view.

Speaking of the Western approach to the Pure Land school, I cannot with good conscience disregard the opinion of the man who, to the best of my knowledge, has subjected this tradition to the most careful and erudite scrutiny from the Christian point of view. I am thinking here of the French theologian, Henri de Lubac, whose work, unfortunately, appears to be practically unknown in Japan and America. I regret to report then that the opinion of that eminent scholar is very similar to that of Ishida Mitsuyuki, quoted above. De Lubac discovers in the Pure Land tradition, "on the surface" or on the level of religious practice, one by one many of the "beautiful points" of Christianity, only to see them reduced — at further scrutiny and on the level of doctrine — to their opposites, the common doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism in general. "Anyway, the fact imposes itself: To the extent that one enters into the doctrine which underlies Amidism, one watches all really essential difference with the other forms of Mahāyāna disappear, while on the other hand the gap between it and Christianity deepens more and more." (Lubac 1955, p.268)

That I dare to go at least in part against the opinion of this formidable scholar is due, first, to the fact that the above is not his absolutely last word on the question (to which we shall come later) and second, to the fact that de Lubac labored under a double handicap in his research. The first one is, I believe, the traditional Christian presupposition of its total uniqueness, which makes it a foregone conclusion (or almost) that, no matter how much another tradition resembles Christianity, it cannot possibly be the real (supernatural) thing. The second handicap is his very limited access to Japanese sources, so that his image of the Pure Land tradition is mostly formed by Chinese sources and no real difference appears therein between Chinese and Japanese Amidism.¹

For the first point, suffice it to say that during the last thirty years the possibilities for Christians to see and recognize other religions as they are have greatly widened. As to the second point, I want to stress here that the Japanese Pure Land school since Hōnen, although rooted indeed in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, is by no means reducible to it. One should not forget that, with Hōnen, this school saw its declaration of independence from the rest of Mahāyāna (now called by them "The Path of Sages," shōdōmon) and, since then, while never developing a truly original doctrine, has been reflecting in various ways on that independent nature and trying out conclusions from its own particularity.² To adduce only one piece of evidence in support, I can refer to another pattern found in Shinshū presentations: "Christianity says this..., Buddhism believes that..., but Shinshū teaches the following...."³

¹ Thus, Suzuki Daisetz, with his earlier indicated bias or hidden agenda, frequently becomes a decisive reference person for him.
² The question became again much more complicated, however, by Shinran’s sophisticated stance. While Hōnen opposed the Pure Land Path to the Path of Sages and insisted on a choice (harryō) to be made between the two, Shinran can in a sense be seen as an attempt to close the gap again and to "return to Buddhism."
³ Cf., for example, FUGEN 1950, pp.7, 37-44, 63, 68-69, 80-81, 219, 324-328.
Some Probings

The first thing we must recognize, I believe, is the fact that much of the animosity surrounding our question is, after all, rooted in the mistaken conception that any religion is reducible to a simple essence that does not change in time and by which this particular religion is clearly delineated from all other religions. Indeed, both sides of the argument are built on this premise. Shinshū cannot be innerly or deeply in line with Christianity, because it is innerly and essentially Buddhist; and, Shinshū is innerly in line with Christianity and therefore cannot really be called Buddhist. However, one of the main benefits recent developments in the science of religion have to offer us is that they have proven, over and over again, that such an idea of a religion is a chimera, and that every religion is a complex (with inner plurality) and living reality, developing in time by cross-fertilization and adaptation to new stimuli and circumstances. As is well known, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for one, has made it his life work, as it were, to fight that kind of “reification” of the different religions. I believe that, without necessarily agreeing with all his conclusions, we can all gain by ruminating his “medicine.” To quote only a few of his most striking sentences:

What is profoundly important in the religious life of any people, and elemental to all our discussions, is that, whatever else it may be, religious life is a kind of life.

We are participants in an overt tradition that has become rich and varied, because men at successive stages in its accumulating development have contributed each his share to making it so. (SMITH 1978, pp. 136 and 166)

Pluralism, and the need to come to terms with it conceptually and spiritually, confront us in our day in the intra-religious level also, not only globally. Religious diversity is a problem within, as well as among, communities.

If one asks what it has meant to be Buddhist, the only possible answer from anyone even reasonably informed is that it has meant different things at different times and places. (SMITH 1981, pp.23 and 24)

This last sentence, which drives home for us this so important truth, must of course be counterbalanced by the complementary insight that all forms of Buddhism are “linked in the dynamic processes of history,” (SMITH 1981, p.25) in a kind of pratitya-samutpāda, and thus form one “cumulative tradition” and show a real unity, which is however essentially different from the unity shown by a “thing” and which it may be impossible to express in a logical formulation or definition. The consciousness of this historical link, and the concomitant sense of belonging and feeling of loyalty toward a tradition, certainly play a big and legitimate role in our question. On the other hand, however, a realistic awareness of the complexity and historicity of every religious tradition could take away the odium putatively attached to every “deviation” from, or irreducibility to, a narrowly conceived “normative essence” of one’s tradition. It could make possible a different evaluation of and attitude towards one’s tradition, somewhat along the following lines: We are rooted in, and an integral part of, this tradition (let us say, Buddhism) and are proud of the fact but, on the other hand, we have a special place within this tradition, since we embody and live, at the same time, valuable religious elements which cannot directly be ascribed to the common denominator of our tradition and may show a strong affinity to some other tradition (e.g., Christianity). The timeliness of this kind of self-awareness may find some confirmation in the growing number of “religious pilgrims,” people who are fundamentally loyal to one tradition but, at the same time, find essential spiritual food in another tradition.

Applying these ideas now more explicitly to our “triangle:” Buddhism-Shinshū-Christianity, I want to offer for discussion a rather bold formulation, being fully aware that several of the terms
used in this formulation may be open to objection and certainly stand in need of further refinement.

Shinshū is fundamentally and intrinsically Buddhist. The root-source of its purity and depth is to be found in the Buddhist tradition. However, Shinshū cannot simply be reduced to what is often called the “original inspiration” or “quintessence” of Buddhism. It crystallizes within itself a stream of religious impulses — most of which may also be present, be it mostly in a latent form, in other schools of Buddhism — into a Gestalt that differs from what is sometimes called the “mainstream of Buddhism.”

Let me add a few words of clarification, to ward off the most obvious misunderstandings and objections. As an illustration of the first part of my thesis, I like to quote a sentence by H. de Lubac (although I cannot fully underwrite it): “By the doctrine on which it is based, the cult of Amida takes on a significance which divests it from all essential resemblance to the Christian religion — and which, moreover, makes it into something completely different from a vulgar religion or a mere conglomeration of superstitions. This cult thus finds its place within Buddhism; it enters into the Buddhist orthodoxy.” (LUBAC 1955, p.257)

In the second part of the “thesis,” then, I unashamedly stress the “specificity” of Shinshū (or, larger, the Pure Land school) and am ready to go along, very far, with those people who have brought to the fore the big differences that exist between the Pure Land school and other forms of Buddhism, to the point of sometimes concluding that Shinshū is not Buddhism, does not correspond to the “original” or “essential” Buddhism. I feel free to go along that far precisely because I do not believe in such a simple essence and therefore do not feel bound to that conclusion.

On the other hand, I have deliberately used the term “mainstream of Buddhism,” in full awareness that I may thereby stir up a hornets’ nest, because I think that we cannot avoid it and may even need it, if we want to bring out the real problematics of our question. My reasons for this are as follows. Firstly, the study of the history of religion may have convinced us of the multiformity of Buddhism and of the impossibility of bringing this rich variety under one logical common denominator, but still our synthetic mind demands at the least some principle of order, some configuration or maybe mandala. Thus, we all work factually but sometimes unconsciously, I think, with some idea of a “trunk line,” “main thrust,” or “mainstream” of Buddhism. I am not a Buddhologist but I have the impression that, as far as Mahāyāna Buddhism is concerned, most people find that mainstream in the philosophical line of the logic of emptiness, formlessness, and impersonality. And secondly, Shinshū doctrinal scholars themselves appear to work, in the presentations of their faith as truly Buddhist, with an idea of the mainstream (if not “essence”) of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and likewise tend to take the emptiness philosophy as their point of reference. One can detect, I think, two basic tendencies in their works, but I have no sufficient idea as yet as to their relative strength or frequency:

1. To accept emptiness philosophy as the criterion of Buddhist orthodoxy and then to prove that, finally or fundamentally, the “Amida cult” does not contradict this.

2. To indicate that, contrary to what most people think, the main thrust of Mahāyāna Buddhism, rather than in that philosophical line, is to be found in these religious impulses which finally led up to Shinran’s kind of religiosity. When sufficiently pursued, this tendency results in a specific Shinshū view of the history of Buddhism.

It is probably right to say that most representations of Shinshū by its doctrinal scholars show both these tendencies, but in different

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These considerations have led me to a further formulation which I also want to submit for your criticism:

The Buddhist Pure Land school contains within itself an unresolvable, living, and possibly creative, tension between its own particular religiosity and the mainstream of Buddhism. When going away too far from that mainstream, it is apt to fall into a kind of folk religion that is hardly recognizable as Buddhism. But on the other hand, when trying to stick too closely to the logic of that mainstream, it tends to lose its own originality and religious dynamism — as well as its inner affinity with Christianity.

Permit me again to add a few considerations to this terse formulation. I have not the shadow of a doubt about the existence of this inner tension, which I even like to call “constitutive” of Shinshū as Shinshū. My difficulty lies only in the right characterization of the two poles of this tension. Over against the “mainstream pole” — as operative in the consciousness of the Shinshū intellectuals, and earlier characterized as very philosophical in nature —, the other pole then naturally appears as responsible for the specificity of Shinshū within Buddhism. In my provisional description of it the word “religious” looms large. This goes basically back, of course, to the first impression of the observer who finds it easier to recognize as religious the figure (or person) of Amida as object of faith than the idea of emptiness. It also agrees, however, with the analysis of some first-class Shinshū scholars. To quote only two of them, Ishida Mitsuyuki opposes to what he considers to be the ultimate level or inner essence of Shinshū, “the practical religious attitude;” (UEDA and ISHIDA 1976, p.301) and Soga Ryōjin, whom I have unfortunately no space to quote at length, has sentences like the following: “Zen is close to philosophy, Shingon shows affinity with art, Ritsu is ethics; only the nenbutsu has the characteristics of religion. And in this affinity there lurks a mighty enemy against whom we must be continually on guard. It is the reason why the nenbutsu is often called superstition.” (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.4, p.220)

If this characterization is near the mark, it might make sense to say that Christianity and Shinshū show a great inner affinity in their type of religiosity, but differ greatly in their logic. As a matter of fact, I believe that this sentence is in a sense revealing, although I am the first to admit that Buddhist logic is intrinsically religious, and the distinction between faith and reason is certainly not as neat as it seems to appear here.

A proximity of that “religious element” with folk religion — that religiosity, not of the sage, but of the “little people” — was also suggested. And also H. de Lubac writes, for instance: “Truly, with these ‘little people’ of the Pure Land school, who ignore all doctrinal subtleties, the Christian can easily feel at home (“en famille”)” (LUBAC 1955, p.252). From this point of view, the tension present in Shinshū could be described as a tug of war between the legitimate desire for logical consistency with the principles of rationality recognized in the Mahāyāna world (and also to eliminate all superstitious forms of the “Amida cult”) and, on the other hand, a real recognition, also in the doctrine, of the religious impulses of the heart, which appear in their rawest state among the “little people,” as having their own rights and validity. From this angle, we could again point out a diversity of “dosage” of these two tendencies in various Shinshū scholars. Thus, I have the impression that for scholars like Ueda Yoshifumi and Ishida Mitsuyuki, for example, the philosophical respectability is first and foremost, while a Kaneko Daiei or a Takeuchi Yoshinori let their theorizing be checked by the simple faith of Shinshū believers.5

From the above it may be sufficiently clear that I do not attach

5 For Kaneko Daiei see, e.g., KANEKO 1936, pp.84-90 and 164-166. For Takeuchi Yoshinori, see, e.g., TAKEUCHI 1983, pp.130-135.
any pejorative connotation or negative value judgment to my idea of the complexity of, and tension within, Shinshū. But, in order to lay to rest all lingering suspicions on this score, it may be good to stress here that I recognize a similar (or possibly much more complicated) "inconsistency" and perpetual "see-saw movement" in my own religion, Catholic Christianity: between its Semitic and Greek components, between its "profane" character as the doctrine of active love (in the line of Matthew 25: 31-46) and its many devotional, ritual, and contemplative elements. But, just as I consider this tension, uncomfortable as it sometimes may be, as constitutive of Christianity, and could not recognize as my religion a doctrine which would reduce one of these poles to the other (and thus, in fact, emasculate it) — so I am of the opinion that, also in Shinshū, both poles and their mutual tension are essential, and that "true Shinshū" will always consist in an "uneasy balance" of the two, wherein there is quite some leeway for "dosage," as long as both are taken seriously. And, I cannot but feel that those representatives of this "religion of and for the little people (bonbu)," who reduce it, finally, to mainstream Buddhism, try to get rid of that irritating tension and do not show due respect for the faith of those "little people."

If my last "thesis" has a reasonable amount of truth in it, it appears to follow, as a necessary consequence, that the Pure Land school must work out its own independent doctrinal system — a religious system of thought which may never let general Buddhist thought out of sight, but, nevertheless, cannot follow it blindly and must operate at a certain distance from it. The relationship of Christian theology to Greek philosophy comes to mind here as a not too dissimilar case. In the above, I have implied that some Shinshū scholars strike me as not sufficiently showing that necessary independence and reserve, and I am happy to find that Soga Ryōjin, one of the most eminent Shinshū scholars of this century, apparently was of the same opinion.

In 1917 already Soga wrote:

During my trip to Kyoto this time, I was thinking intensely of an independent Shinshū doctrinal system. Our doctrinal studies up to now have been, after all, nothing but an addendum to the doctrine of other schools. From of old an independent Shinshū "doctrinal system" has not existed at all.... Our doctrinal scholars are full of praise for the categories of Tendai and Kegon and do not seem to understand the breadth and depth of Donran's thought on 6so and gensō.... Although Jōdo Shinshū has been an independent congregation for 700 years, our doctrine is still only an accessory to the doctrine of other schools. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.4, pp.425-416)

And later, in 1934, he writes:

I want to find the central point in Shinran's doctrine.... Therefore, I want to proceed in such a way that I avoid seeing only the core of Buddhism in general, while forgetting the own specific core of Jōdo Shinshū. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.10, p.350)

Indeed, Soga is strongly aware that these two "cores" do not exactly coincide. "When asked what the object of Shinshū doctrine is, I would say that Shinshū doctrine consists in clarifying the principle of faith, the Vow-desire as the background of faith." (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.10, p.189)

We are now ready to consider the final question which H. de Lubac poses but does not answer. The main line of his argument, as already indicated, has constantly been: On the surface, in the religious practice of its faithful, Amidism looks very similar to Christianity but, at further scrutiny of the doctrine, it becomes clear that these similarities are illusory. At the end of his very cogent argumentation, however, he writes:
And still, are we entirely right in thus appealing from the appearances of the practice to the reality of the doctrine? Therefore, a question remains which is not a purely psychological one. Which of the two is foremost in people's consciousness, which of the two is the more authentic and stronger one: such or such (at the least virtual) explanation concerning the object of faith, or this faith itself in its first spontaneous impulse ('elan')? We find there a dualism which appears to us, if not as a logical contradiction, then at least as a living paradox, and we naturally try to reduce it by discerning the main element which must return it to unity. But can that only be done in one direction? Is it always right, in order to reach this unity, to divest all upāyas of their rights? Is it necessarily and a priori so that the act of the nenbutsu must pay the costs of the operation? (LUBAC 1955, p.304)

I have quoted this rather long passage mainly for the suggestive way in which it formulates the two poles of the tension, but also because it offers me a good starting point for a concluding summary of my "thesis" on the nature of Jōdo Shinshū as a religion. In the 303 pages preceding this passage, de Lubac has in fact "divested all upāyas of their rights" and reduced the Pure Land tradition to unity in the direction of mainstream Buddhist rationality. In the process, he has also robbed this tradition of all its specific affinity to Christianity and, consequently, taken away much of the motivation a Christian could have for a special study of and dialogue with this tradition, over and above the meeting with mainstream Buddhism. In this, his presentation of "Amidism" differs greatly from most Christian writings on the subject and has, on the other hand, much in common with many presentations of Shinshū scholars. Needless to say that this forms a formidable combination, indeed. Still, I have had the audacity of defending, over against it, the following position.

Such a reduction of the Shinshū reality to the logical unity of a simple essence is a priori impossible, since no living religious tradi-

tion whatsoever possesses such an essence. There can, therefore, be no good reason, apologetic or otherwise, to attempt such a reduction. Moreover, all such attempts necessarily draw a deformed picture of the reality of Shinshū, since they are obliged to consider either one of the poles, which Shinshū carries within itself, as superficial, not essential, not final; while in fact both poles are essential and precisely their tension is constitutive of the living tradition.

Thus, both the tendency to reduce the Pure Land tradition to Christianity (by locating its essence solely in the religious practice, the spontaneous faith of the believers) on the Christian side, and the tendency to reduce this tradition to the essence or mainstream of Buddhism (by classifying these same elements as superficial, not final, mere upāya), as found in (apologetic) Shinshū writings, must be resisted.

The misgivings which H. de Lubac expresses at the end of his admirable study — namely, that he may have been mistaken, after all, in the choice of the essential element — then appear to be superfluous, since the choice itself is uncalled for. On the other hand, however, they constitute a salutary reminder that, indeed, the living faith, if not always the sole criterion of the doctrine, deserves a full hearing alongside the doctrine. For, a real grasp of a living religion always implies a study of both doctrine and religious practice and consciousness, and moreover of their dialectical relationship.

When both poles of the Shinshū reality are respected, Shinshū appears as both intrinsically Buddhist and essentially related to Christianity, with which it shares many religious impulses and themes.

For a Christian, then, study of and dialogue with Shinshū becomes doubly rewarding. For, on the one hand, Shinshū reveals one of the many possible forms of Buddhism and thus throws light on Buddhism as a whole. And, on the other hand, a study of the
way in which these religious themes which Shinshū has in common with Christianity are treated in Shinshū can teach him/her how the treatment of these themes in Christianity can be enriched and corrected by the Buddhist logic. Would it be too much to say that the Pure Land tradition has already done half of the work which the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is supposed to do?

If this is true, there can be no doubt left about Shinshū’s being a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity.

Some Test Cases

It rests on me now, if not to “prove” this rather bold and sweeping thesis, then at least to concretize and substantiate some of its elements, or to make its meaning clearer, by a few well-chosen examples or test cases. This I shall try to do in the below, but I must ask the reader’s indulgence since the confines of an article do not permit me to argue my case fully.

When asking ourselves anew what we are looking for, the answer might be formulated in the following way. We are looking for concrete examples of the presence, in Pure Land doctrine, of a tension between its “religious impulses” and the general Buddhist logic. Or, to rephrase from the standpoint of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the object of our quest are instances of an “Aus- einandersetzung”, within the Pure Land religion, between general Buddhist religiosity and typically Pure Land religious themes, which often show a great similarity with Christian religious themes. At the same time we must look for a verification of our hypothesis that this historical symbiosis has led, in some doctrinal positions, to an undue weakening of the religious themes specific to Pure Land religiosity, but has also produced in some cases a refinement of these themes, mostly by a successful synthesis with Buddhist emptiness thought.

In general terms, the tension in question may be aptly described, I believe, as the “opposition” between the non-duality postulated by Buddhist emptiness thought and the “dualism” required by Pure Land piety, wherein unity with Amida implies the actual overcoming (by Amida’s merciful activity) of a real duality or abyss. As Soga puts it:

Without making the Tathāgata in his paradise the object of our nostalgia and prayer, faith becomes idle fancy and lifeless theory ... (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.4, p.341)

Mystery is an element of faith in the sense that faith makes it necessary that the distance between sentient beings and the Tathāgata be taken away. However, if one stresses that non-duality one-sidedly, the meaning of the two elements of this non-duality is reduced to nothing... Moreover, no matter how wonderful the theory, I remain a bonbu as before.... That kind of faith lacks the feeling of pious and relying trust. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.10, p.7)

Of the religious themes, which are central for Pure Land religiosity and are equally important for Christianity, but not — or not centrally — present in mainstream Buddhism, the following will come directly to mind: Mercy (Love) as the first principle of everything; human sinfulness; faith as entrusting to an Other Power; a “Dharma” with a face or personality; desire as the dynamic principle of religious life. And, conversely, of the religious themes that are strongly present in mainstream (Mahāyāna) Buddhism, but can be accommodated in Pure Land doctrine only in a “contorted” and hardly recognizable way, we could mention the iron law of individual karmic causality and the idea of innate Buddha Nature.

From this quick and far from exhaustive overview it sufficiently appears that the few remaining pages at my disposal will not permit me to really “plead my case” in any thorough way. Instead, I can only offer a summary presentation of three “sample cases.” One, an instance wherein, in my opinion, the weight of the Buddhist
tradition has induced Shinshū scholars to underplay a central Pure Land theme. Two, an example wherein a general Buddhist tenet, uncritically upheld, endangers a central doctrine of Shinshū faith. Three, a “mixed” example wherein adherence to the general Buddhist “logic” constitutes a danger for, but at the same time leads to a refinement of, a Shinshū religious theme.

I. Amida’s Mercy and Buddhist Wisdom

There can be little doubt, I believe, that in Pure Land religiosity Amida’s Mercy is absolutely primal and central. On the other hand, in Buddhist systematic doctrine — not necessarily so in the more primary religious language of symbol and myth, as for example the Jātaka stories — Mercy “plays second fiddle” to Wisdom and is generally reduced to emptiness. Mercy is then defined as non-duality of self and other (jita funi), and benefiting others (rita) reduced to leading others to Wisdom (kyōke). I believe that this, in itself, not only betrays an insufficient analysis of the nature of Mercy or love, but also amounts to a narrowing down of the field of Mercy to the individual and spiritual spheres. Be that as it may, in view of the centrality of Amida’s Mercy, I would expect Pure Land doctrine to work out a system of thought wherein Mercy, rather than Wisdom or at the most together with Wisdom, functions as the first and irreducible principle. This would, of course, imply a much more careful analysis of the nature of Mercy, and would hopefully lead to a view of Mercy that is freed from its Wisdom-bound limitations in its working.

In fact, however, most Pure Land doctrinal studies appear to be satisfied with following the general Buddhist scheme, which in fact is insufficient for its purposes. It is only sporadically that a more specific Pure Land note is heard on the question. An example of this I find again in Soga Ryōjin:

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In the self-power school one considers Mercy as accommodated Wisdom, but in the Tathāgata’s Vow for the salvation of all sentient beings, unprovoked Mercy (mu-en jihi) is made the substance (tai) of the Tathāgata, and wisdom and divine power the working (yu) of the Primal Vow of Great Mercy. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.3, p.199)

I see the Tathāgata as a limitless candle.... The core of the light is a limitless darkness.... If one considers Wisdom to be light, then Mercy is darkness.... The Tathāgata’s darkness is truly the moving force behind his Wisdom. Therein lies his true life. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.4, p.317)

We cannot be saved by the power of mere light. For the light, real human love is darkness of illusion. Only by the Tathāgata’s Primal Vow of Great Mercy can our actual human power of love and attachment be assumed, and infinite life obtain in this illusory human life. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.3, p.207)

Unfortunately, Soga never systematized these ideas and in some instances he simply falls back into the general Buddhist scheme. To me the idea itself that Mercy is not really given pride of place in Shinshū doctrinal studies would be unbelievable, if I did not know that also in Christianity the Greek idea of God’s essence as immutable perfection of Being has mostly relegated Love to the rank of divine attribute.

II. Karma, the ghostly interloper

To the best of my knowledge, most Shinshū scholars contend that Shinshū doctrine, just like Buddhism in general, is solidly based on the karmic law of causality, and occasionally find therein a proof of the superiority of Shinshū over Christianity, which is then alleged to disregard the (scientific) law of causality. Thereby it is often not even intimated that the iron law of karma may not fare so well in the company of Amida’s merciful intervention.6

I do not know in how far the law of karma is really constitutive
of Buddhism or is even compatible with it, but it looks rather clear to me that the law of karma, as usually understood, and merciful Other Power are pulling in opposite directions. My misgivings center on three points and can be evoked by the following three questions: Does or does not Other Power interfere with, or counteract, the karma of the believer? Can the omnipotent Power of Amida’s Vow be called karmic power? Does or does not the attainment of faith depend on the karmic situation of the believer?

Fortunately, I do not find myself alone with my misgivings. Suzuki Daisetz is rather categorical when he writes: “Self-power is the same as karma. The world of transference (ekō) can in no wise go together with the world of karma.” And he quotes the Anjinketsujōshō as saying:

One would expect that he who truly wants to be born in the Pure Land must himself make a vow and practice diligently but, in fact, the diligence in vow and practice is on the Bodhisattva’s side, and the fruits come about on our side. This is different from and beyond the law of causality of the world and of going beyond the world. (SUZUKI 1981, p.32)

And in connection with the “establishment of faith,” Soga Ryojin writes:

From of old one speaks here of “the opening up of our accumulated good karma” or of “the turn-about of the karmic relations.” But what does that mean after all? Think about it! If we interpret that literally and according to common sense, it amounts to destroying pure Other Power from the roots up.... Are Amida’s 6 FUGEN 1950, p.165, however, explicitly recognizes the problem, at least in one of its aspects: “Salvation by Other Power looks like ‘other cause-self effect’. Since this is something that Buddhism, which has the law of causality as its basic standpoint, cannot admit, the religion of Shinran appears to be an ‘heretical path’.”

He then goes on to explain the different attempts at solving this problem in the history of Shinshū doctrinal studies - attempts which, unfortunately, look very “contorted” and unconvincing to me.

If the difficulty is indeed so serious, why then do Shinshū scholars still want to maintain that Shinshū doctrine is perfectly in accordance with the law of karma? The main reason appears to be that these scholars consider the law of karma to belong to the “essence” of the Buddhism with which they want to identify Shinshū religion. But also important may be the fact that karma plays a big role in Shinran’s thinking. In the general introduction to the Kyōgyōshinshō, for instance, Shinran writes: “If you should come to realize this practice and shinjin [faith], rejoice at the conditions from the distant past that have brought it about” (SHINRAN 1983, p.58). But there the true question might be what Shinran, who showed himself so free in giving new contents to transmitted concepts, understood under “karma” or “conditions of the past.”

Lack of space obliges me now to forego all further analysis and to simply present the “conclusion” to which I have provisionally come. Insofar as they try to stick to the original idea of karma, Shinshū scholars must show unbelievable feats of contortionist logic to reconcile it with the working of Other Power. Mostly, however, they appear to silently abandon the original meaning of the term (as used in general Buddhism), and to load it instead with a meaning that is compatible with the tenets of their faith — another chapter in the book on eating your cake and having it...! “Karma” then comes to mean the human condition of sinfulness, a sinfulness that, like the “original sin” of Christianity, has deep roots in the past and is therefore ineluctable. At the same time, however, karma comes to denote the past dimension of the gracious working of Amida, whereby the karma of the individual is lined and embraced by Other Power. 7 Some samples may be added here for illustration.
The Dharma (ho) flows in the present...and is always waiting for the empathic response on the part of sentient beings (ki).... The advent of the right moment is not a simple thing; it is something that precludes foreknowledge on the part of man.... Therefore, one speaks of past good and karmic causes.... Truly, it is the perception of one’s past karma that becomes the feeling of one’s connection (en) with Amida in the past. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.7, pp.81 and 137)

In Dharmakara, the power of salvation was planted into the field of accumulated karma. In that interaction lies the meaning of past karma. (SOGA 1978, p.120)

Amida’s Vow Power works in perfect conformity with the laws of cause and effect which are known only to Buddhas and a mere portion of which we actually recognize as the laws of cause and effect. Our logic and reason based on these common-sense laws have no place in the working of Amida’s Vow Power. (INAGAKI 1983, pp.26-27)

III. The “objective” reality of Amida

We come finally to the central and very delicate problem of the nature of the reality of Amida Buddha and of his relationship to sentient beings. This problem is of course not identical, but nevertheless has much in common, with the Christian problem of the nature of God’s reality and his relationship to us sinful creatures.

Our Christian consciousness on this question, apart from Greek philosophy, is most strongly shaped by the biblical language, which presents the saving God as an objective reality, absolutely independent from us, but showing clearly personal traits and standing over against the sinful creature in an I-Thou relationship. It can

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7 I like to think that Shinran has something similar in mind when, in the just quoted text, he speaks of the “conditions of the distant past.” But why not admit that such a karma, embraced by Other Power, is not its old honest self-powered self anymore?

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be said that many Pure Land texts, especially devotional ones, present Amida, the savior and object of devotion, in a somewhat similar way. Indeed, especially to a (Western) Christian, it looks as if any “de-construction” of that objective and majestic reality of Amida would make it psychologically impossible for a believer to entrust his/her very life and salvation to Him. This “natural” reaction on the part of Christians was vividly expressed in a recent writing:

I have to ask myself whether...the relativization of Amida and his vow of Other Power [in Tanabe Hajime’s Philosophy of Metanoetics] is an existential option in the religious sphere.... Can a devout Shin Buddhist give up all reliance on self-power to put all his or her hopes in the promise of Amida Buddha and at the same time know philosophically that Amida is only an image cast up by his own faith? Can a Shin Buddhist be sure of salvation through the Primal Vow of Amida and at the same time be convinced that to think of Amida as an objective reality is superstition? (HIGGINS 1990, p.159)

But that this is not simply a misgiving from a Christian bias is sufficiently indicated by sentences such as the following, which regularly appear in Soga Ryōjin’s works:

Is Amida then only an imagined personality, the fruit of poetical imagination? But, how can He then be the object of faith, especially of earnest faith?.... I can rest assured in the Primal Vow of the Tathāgata only if I consider the Tathāgata to be infinite and absolute. (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.1, pp.255 and 217) The real existence of the Tathāgata is demanded by our affectivity, over against the critique of reason. (Ibid., Vol.2, p.154)

On the other hand, Buddhist (Mahāyāna) logic tends to do away with all duality and “over-against-ness” of the Buddha and the sentient being, and to focus everything on the self of the human subject. And I have the strong impression that many Shinshū scho-
lars, in their eagerness to comply with that logic as such, endanger even the minimum of objectivity (of Amida and the Pure Land) necessary for the life of faith, and cannot but think — *a priori*, it is true, since *a posteriori* evidence is hard to come by — that they thereby distance themselves very far from the content of the faith as it is lived by "earnest believers."

Here, however, I want to stress the opposite side of the coin: namely, that a "passage" through the Buddhist logic of emptiness — this in contradistinction to sticking to it as the last word — is very salutary, and even necessary, for all our thinking about the "Transcendent," be it Amida or God; and that therefore Shinshū doctrine, which has been pressed to do exactly that by its Mahāyāna parentage, can on this point be enormously helpful to Christian theology. For, our Christian idea of God also needs constant "de-reification," "de-substantialization," and "demythologizing." In other words, I expect Shinshū reflections to provide Christianity with new forms of negative or apophatic theology and new insights into the relationship between the apophatic and the kataphatic. A further question, but one we cannot touch on this time, would be in how far this non-dual thinking can in its own way enhance the life of faith and devotion.

Since a real development of this central theme is not possible here, I shall restrict myself to a summary presentation, as a kind of test case, of Soga Ryojin’s position on this point. Soga has been continuously preoccupied with this question and has approached it from many different angles. He thereby appears to steer, understandably enough, a zig-zag course between the two horns of the dilemma. For these reasons a unified presentation of his thought is hard to provide, but a remark by Alfred Bloom may set us on the way:

Soga Ryojin has stated that the Tathāgata is myself, but I am not the Tathāgata. Salvation is possible because there is an underlying identity of Buddha and beings; salvation is necessary because we experience the unbridgeable chasm between our natures as finite humans and the infinite purity and compassion of the Buddha. (BLOOM 1984, p.44)

Soga is, after all, heir to Kiyozawa Manshi’s "spiritualism." Kiyozawa Manshi reacted against a traditional objectivism, that sees Amida and the Pure Land as "objective realities apart from faith," and "proclaimed all these objects to be faith-realities, subject-realities" (SOGA 1970-1972, Vol.2, p.166). Soga himself, thus, wants objects of faith wherein the human subject and its experience are involved, and constantly rejects a distant, independent, objective reality of Amida and the Pure Land. "Away from the self-awareness of faith, the Tathāgata and the Pure Land stay far away in one corner in the West, the doctrine is a 3000 year old piece of paper, and salvation an ideal for after death" (Ibid., Vol.4, p.375). At the same time, however, he tries in different ways to stress the "not merely subjective" reality of the "Amida of faith." While linking Amida as closely as possible with the believing subject, he is at the same time very careful to honor the central faith experience of the infinite distance between the sinful self and merciful Amida, and to preserve an Other Power that is genuinely other. To quote only two very clear pronouncements in that line:

The spiritual distance between the human and the Tathāgata becomes greater the more one practices the path. (Ibid., Vol.1, p.237)

In Shinran, the idea of the Tathāgata did not lead to an awareness of "I am the Tathāgata." On the contrary, it became a realization of the real existence of the Tathāgata outside the self. In adhering to a relationship of absolute "standing over against one another," he reacted against the Chinese fluid circularity and agreed with the Indian stress on distinction. In that way, he restored the qualities of earnestness and decision. (Ibid., Vol.2, p.143)
So, on the right, he battled against an object of faith that has no relation to the human heart (as “a reaction against those who, without truly taking the true subject of the self into consideration, exclusively look outside for a chimeric god.” [Ibid., Vol.3, p.257]). And on the left he was continually engaged in battle against a foe which he often symbolically indicated with a word of Shinran, “Self-nature, Mind-only,” meaning roughly the mental attitude, rampant in the Japanese “Path of Sages,” to make the subject of the individual absolutely central in religion. Soga often stresses that there is an essential difference in their view on the relationship of the self and the Buddha between the Pure Land Path and the others. Thus, he will, for instance, criticize Zen for its “self-inflating and fantastic consciousness of ‘My heart, that is the Buddha’” (Ibid., Vol.2, p.145), and also say: “Faith religion criticizes as demonic the idea that the self as such is the Tathāgata” (Ibid., Vol.1, p.227).

Still, a faithful presentation of Soga’s way of thinking must start, I believe, from the Mahāyāna ideal of non-duality, but then offer the complete formula of that ideal, which is fuichi funi (not-one, not-two), and remark that Soga, while always presupposing the not-two, strongly stresses the not-one side of that equation. In other words, Soga starts from the unity of Amida and sentient being, but limits or conditions that unity in many different ways. A, not necessarily exhaustive, list of these conditionings may give us a good insight into his thought:

1. There can be no question of equality in that unity. “Faith-thought and Tathāgata, they are forever two aspects and never fuse into one. The Tathāgata is parent, faith-thought is child.” (Ibid., Vol.4, p.335)

2. This unity is rather to be thought of as a “coincidentia oppositorum;” two opposite poles evoking one another. “We believe that the Buddha Wisdom shines all the brighter, the deeper our ignorance, and that the heavier our sin, the stronger is the Buddha power” (Ibid., Vol.4, p.251). “I am not He, not by a long stretch. But He is I. How could my past self of illusory attachment be He who is light?” (Ibid., Vol.3, p.28)

3. It is not a static, ontological, unity but a dialectical, living one of inter-action within the practice of faith — a relationship whereby the two continually change places and turn into one another. “The unity of sentient being (ki) and Dharma (hō), of subject and object, has its true meaning only on the basis of the practice wherein subject and object switch places.” (Ibid., Vol.3, p.124)

4. It is not an original unity, but a unity brought about by an “incarnation,” whereby Amida actively identifies himself with us. Soga summarizes what he calls “the three great principles of Shinshū doctrine” as follows: 1. I am I; 2. The Tathāgata is I, i.e., “the mystery that the Tathāgata deigns to become me;” 3. “I am not the Tathāgata.” And he adds that it is wrong to turn things around and to believe that “the self is originally the Tathāgata” (Ibid., Vol.4, p.352).

5. It is a unity only “in faith,” one that obtains only when the sentient being is bathed in the light of Amida. “In my faith, I as the believer and the Tathāgata as the object of faith are both absolute.... Within that light I am completely one with the Tathāgata, and there is not a spot of sinfulness.... However, there is a backdrop of deep darkness to my faith.... I, who am absolutely in faith call the Tathāgata my father.... However, as to practice, I am a bastard or orphan, lost at the bottom of the ocean of birth-and-death” (Ibid., Vol.4, pp.382-383).

6. To be able to say that Amida is one’s own self, the self in question must be a “self beyond the self.” “The self as subject of faith is a mysterious self, a self beyond the self. If so, the self as subject of faith is precisely the Tathāgata.” (Ibid., Vol.2, p.183)

7. We do not experience that unity of Amida and the self directly in our own selves, but rather in the figures of our spiritual
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guides (zenchishiki), who appear to us as avatars of Amida.

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8 One is reminded here of St. Paul's 'I live, not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal.2:20) — a statement that figures in Christian mystical theology, but which I never saw given a substantial role in systematic theology.
REPORT

Armin H. Kroehler*

RELIGIOUS DIALOG AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL

I. Ryōnuma District Religionists Dialog Association

One day in July, 1989, I received a phone call. “This is the Risshō Kōsei-kai, Aizu-Bange Church. Our leader would like to visit you sometime. When would it be convenient for you?”

We made arrangements, and a few days later a regional representative of Risshō Kōsei-kai and several staff members came to our home with gifts. It was our first meeting, and we exchanged pleasantries as tea was served. In the course of the conversation one of the group expressed concern that people in our day have strayed away from religion, that religionists on the local level should be working together on behalf of world peace (as they have been doing at the top levels), and that he was hoping that religionists of the Ryōnuma district1 could form an organization for dialog and action. In the town of Bange where he lived, priests of various Buddhist denominations had been meeting on occasion, he said. Now they would like to expand that interaction.

I immediately said that our Aizu Christian Rural Life Center would welcome interreligious dialog. This has been one area the Center has wanted to pursue, but other programs have taken precedence while this concern has remained on the back burner. I told the regional representative that in 1971 and 1972 there had been a

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1 Ryōnuma — the Two “Numas” — Kawanuma Gun (County), with the town of Aizu-Bange at the center, and Onuma Gun, with Aizu-Takada at the center.