

Modern Buddhism
in
Japan

edited by

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NANZAN

Contents

- 1 Editors' Introduction:
Studies on Modern Buddhism in Contemporary Japan
– HAYASHI Makoto, ŌTANI Eiichi, and Paul L. SWANSON
- 17 Shin Buddhist Contributions to the Japanese
Enlightenment Movement of the Early 1870s
– Mick DENECKERE
- 52 The Movement Called “New Buddhism”
in Meiji Japan
– ŌTANI Eiichi
- 85 The Age of Teaching:
Buddhism, the Proselytization of Citizens,
the Cultivation of Monks, and the Education of Laypeople
during the Formative Period of Modern Japan
– TANIGAWA Yutaka
- 112 Suzuki Daisetsu and Swedenborg: A Historical Background
– YOSHINAGA Shin'ichi
- 144 Takagi Kenmyō and Buddhist Socialism:
A Meiji Misfit and Martyr
– Paul L. SWANSON
- 163 Religious Studies and Religiously Affiliated Universities
– HAYASHI Makoto
- 194 The Insect in the Lion's Body: Kaneko Daiei and
the Question of Authority in Modern Buddhism
– Jeff SCHROEDER

Takagi Kenmyō and Buddhist Socialism

A Meiji Misfit and Martyr

Paul L. SWANSON

TAKAGI Kenmyō 高木顯明 (1864–1914) was a Shinshū Ōtani branch Pure Land Buddhist priest who was arrested in 1910 by the Japanese government on trumped-up charges of plotting to assassinate the emperor, as part of a crackdown on “socialist elements” known as the “High Treason” affair (*taigyaku jiken* 大逆事件). He was identified as a troublemaker by the government on account of his social activism for anti-discrimination and anti-war (Russo-Japanese war) stances. After his arrest he was immediately renounced by the Shinshū hierarchy, with his ordination rescinded and his family driven from their temple and home in Shingū, Wakayama prefecture.

Takagi himself was sentenced to be executed but died in prison in 1914, reportedly by his own hand. His honor was finally restored in 1996 with an official apology by the Ōtani organization and the posthumous restoration of his priestly rank. In this essay I will look at the life and times of Takagi Kenmyō and examine his experiences and writings (mainly his essay on “My Socialism”), as one of the few Buddhist priests who was conscientiously opposed to the militaristic-imperialistic tendencies at work in the Japanese government and society at the time, and who resisted the social pressures to conform in early twentieth-century Japan.

The Life and Times of Takagi Kenmyō

Almost exactly one hundred years have passed since the arrest and death (1910 to 1914) of Takagi Kenmyō. Of the millions of people who have come and gone in the interim, why is Takagi worthy of special attention? He was not an influential figure during his lifetime; he did not leave a large and impressive collection of writings; he was a “minor” figure among the twenty-four arrested (and executed or imprisoned) in the High Treason affair of 1910–1911; he took his own life in prison, most likely in despair over having lost everything (his family, his temple, his social standing, his identity as a Buddhist priest) with no hope of restoration. And yet his ideals of equality for all (a “socialism” based on his Pure Land Buddhist faith), which inspired him to activism in opposition to social discrimination and war, now seem prophetic, and he is widely respected as a model, and even a hero and martyr, for the social ideals of Shinshū Pure Land Buddhism in contemporary Japan.

The man who came to be known as “Takagi Kenmyō” was born in 1864, just before the dawn of the Meiji period, in Nishi-Kasugai-gun (west of Nagoya) as Yamada Tsumasaburō 山田妻三郎, the third son of a lay Shinshū merchant family.¹ At the age of sixteen he entered the Owari Junior School 尾張小教校 (currently the Nagoya Ōtani High School) to be certified as a teacher, and around this time accepted ordination (*tokudo* 得度) at his family temple Hōzōji 法藏寺, taking the name “Kenmyō.”² At the age of eighteen he married Tajima Kyō 田島きょう and was adopted into the Tajima family. Shortly thereafter he graduated with a teaching certificate, and helped with temple duties at various temples in the Kasugai-gun and Nagoya area.

In the first of many tragedies in his life, Kenmyō’s wife Kyō passed away in 1888, when he was just twenty-four years old. It seems that after his wife’s death, Kenmyō returned temporarily to the Yamada family. His later friend (and somewhat biographer) Okino Iwasaburō writes that Kenmyō “became

1. My summary of Kenmyō’s life is based on various sources such as SHINSHŪ ŌTANI-HA SHŪMUSHO 2010, DAITŌ 2011, the Jōsenji home page (<http://www1.ocn.ne.jp/~jyosenji/>) and conversations with the current head priest Yamaguchi Noriyuki 山口範之, various articles by IZUMI Shigeki, and the biographical stories by OKINO Iwasaburō (1918).

2. The school records show that he registered as “Yamada Kenmyō, a disciple of Hōzōji” 法藏寺衆徒山田顕明.

a Shinshū priest at the urging of his parents but, not having a family temple of his own, worked as a visiting priest in various Nagoya temples. When his faith was shaken, he went to hear some Christian sermons and also the teachings of a Nichiren scholar named Suzuki.”³ Kenmyō’s Shinshū faith survived. In the meantime, he had been studying traditional Shinshū teachings and receiving academic training at Yōgenji 養源寺 in Kasugai under the tutelage of a Shinshū scholar named Kamori Kūkan 神守空觀, and was also involved with temple duties at the nearby Dōninji 道仁寺, which was run by the Takagi family. This connection was crucial for Kenmyō’s future, and when Takagi Raijō 高木禮讓 of Dōninji was appointed chief priest (*jūshoku* 住職) of the small temple Jōsenji 浄泉寺 in Shingū (Wakayama) in 1891, Kenmyō may have intermittently helped out with the propagation of Shinshū teachings among the workers in the mines upstream from Shingū along the Kūmano river.⁴ This was perhaps Kenmyō’s first serious encounter with the extreme poverty and social discrimination suffered by certain segments of Japanese society. In 1893, at the age of twenty-nine, he was officially adopted by the Takagi family of Dōninji, and finally takes the name “Takagi Kenmyō.”

Perhaps with new confidence, in the following year 1894 Kenmyō gave public lectures in Nagoya and Kyoto on “Why Nichiren-shū is Not Buddhist” (*Nichiren-shū hi-Bukkyō* 日蓮宗非佛教), which were soon published in pamphlet form.⁵ This is the only publication by Kenmyō apart from his more famous essay on “My Socialism,” but it stands in stark contrast to his later activity. First, he begins with “a *banzai* for the Emperor, *banzai* for Buddhism, and *banzai* for the people of Kyoto,” whereas later he conscientiously avoided such patriotic expressions and refused to conform to the

3. Quoted in DAITŌ 2011, 28–29. Okino Iwasaburō 沖野岩三郎 (1876–1956) was the pastor of the Christian church in Shingū, a friend who shared Kenmyō’s concern over social discrimination. He was part of the “Shingū Group,” most of whom were arrested in the High Treason affair, but Okino somehow escaped the clutches of the government officials and later wrote and published thinly-veiled biographical short stories and novels about his departed colleagues. In addition to the sources cited below, see also HIGASHI HONGANJI 2000, 76–77.

4. Or, since there are no records of activity in this early period, Kenmyō may not have visited the mines until after he began working full time at Jōsenji in 1897; see DAITŌ 2011, 36–37.

5. For details see DAITŌ 2011, 31–35, and MAEDA 1999.

requirements of those in power, such as conducting memorial services for the war dead. He mentions Christianity and Tenrikyō as “great enemies of Buddhism,” though he goes on to argue that Nichiren-shū is a greater danger as an “inner” threat, in contrast to in later life when he finds Christians among his closest soulmates in the struggle against discrimination.⁶ He also shows a lack of empathy toward the social outcasts of Japanese society, in contrast to his strenuous efforts on their behalf later in his life, by arguing that “Nichiren-shū is not Buddhist” because the founder Nichiren was the son of an outcast (*eta no ko Nichiren ga kyōso* 穢多の子日蓮が教祖)! These examples indicate that at the time Kenmyō was still conforming to the “commonsense” general attitudes and practices of his society and religious group, and it was only after he moved full-time to Jōsenji in Shingū that he had a conversion in consciousness with regard to such social issues.

In the wider picture, the year 1894 saw the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, and the Ōtani-ha temples were instructed by the Honganji headquarters to conduct memorial services for the war dead. Kenmyō was about to face head-on the winds of war, as well as the realities of inequality, poverty, and social discrimination.

Head Priest at Jōsenji

In the most significant move of his life, Takagi Kenmyō moved to Jōsenji in 1897, where he worked as an assistant to the *jūshoku* Takagi Reijō. Jōsenji was a small and isolated Shinshū temple located in Shingū at the mouth of the Kumano river. There were no other Ōtani-ha temples within a hundred kilometers. It was an economically poor temple, and Kenmyō worked as a masseur to help make ends meet. But more significantly, most of the parishioners (*danka* 檀家) were so-called *buraku* families, an outcast segment of Japanese society who were victims of discrimination.⁷ It is also important to point out, however, that the temple was unusual in having a mix of parishioners from different social strata, including some of *bushi*-warrior lineage (YAMAGUCHI 1997). Takagi’s direct experience of this social discrimination

6. Not to mention the fact that his adopted daughter, Kayoko, later became a famous Tenrikyō preacher, as we shall relate below.

7. Takagi himself wrote that “of the one hundred and eighty parishioner [families], one hundred and twenty are people of a special type” (see DAITŌ 2011, 40).

seems to have been the deciding factor in his move to actively oppose such discrimination and to promote a socialism based on his religious faith in the universal equality of Amida's grace.

In 1898, soon after his move to Shingū, Kenmyō began co-habitation with a woman named Gonda Tashi 権田たし, who was later added to his family register as his wife. A couple of years later, around the end of 1899 or early 1900, Kenmyō himself, now age thirty-five, became the head priest (*jūshoku*) at Jyōsenji. It was also around this time that he began attending the Kinyōkai 金曜会 (the Friday Club) at the local Christian Shingū Church a short walk from Jōsenji. This was a poetry society that later developed into a more political gathering which included most of the so-called “Shingū (or Kishū) group” who were arrested in the High Treason affair. Among them were Okino Iwasaburō, the pastor of the Shingū Church, and Ōishi Seinosuke 大石誠之助, a famous doctor who had studied and practiced medicine abroad—including the United States, Singapore, and India. Ōishi is said to have offered free medical care for the poor,⁸ and was known affectionately as Dokutoru (the poison-removing doctor) Ōishi. He was also a Christian social activist with close ties to Kōtoku Shūsui 幸徳秋水, the founder of *Heimin Shinbun* 平民新聞, who was in turn the main target in the trumped-up charges of the High Treason affair.

Kenmyō left behind a number of poems, many written for the Friday Club.⁹ Eventually, however, the group changed its name to Kyoshinkai 虚心会 (Empty-minded Candid Club) as it evolved into a more social and politically active group to fight discrimination. It is said that when the Shingū Church needed to retiling its roof, it hired members of the outcast group for the work. When the Church was criticized for hiring “such people,” the issue of social discrimination came to a head, and what began as an informal social group to share poetry became a forum for discussing and opposing discrimination. Various meetings, lectures by special speakers, and discussions were held not only at the Shingū Church but also at Jōsenji.

8. Rumor has it that Ōishi was a model for Kurosawa Akira's film “Red Beard” (*Aka-hige*), but I have found no recorded evidence of this. See HIGASHI HONGANJI 2000, 74–75.

9. I was shown about thirty to forty of these poems on slips of paper, found among Kenmyō's personal effects in the Jōsenji warehouse, by the current head priest Yamaguchi Noriyuki, during one of my visits to the temple. For some examples of his poetry, see also DAITŌ 2011, 51–53.

In the meantime, when a local unwed mother gave birth in 1902 to a baby girl named Kayoko and was not able to raise her, Kenmyō and Tashi took her in and eventually adopted her as their own daughter. In fact it was in 1907, when Kayoko was six years old, that Tashi was registered (*nyūseki*) as Kenmyō's wife and Kayoko officially adopted, just in time for her to begin attending elementary school.¹⁰

In the wider picture, the Russo-Japanese war began in February of 1904. When the Ōtani organization instructed its temples to perform memorial services for the war dead, Kenmyō resisted and became active in anti-war activities such as refusing to take part in celebrations of the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, and opposing the construction of public war memorials. As a result he became increasingly isolated from the local Buddhist community, and found fellowship instead with the Christians of the Shingū Church and local leftist journalists.

It was around this time that Kenmyō composed his essay on “My Socialism” (*Yo ga shakaishugi* 我が社会主義, 1904), the work for which he is best known. It is a short essay, only eight journal pages in annotated English translation, and focusses on Kenmyō's concept of “socialism” in light of his religious faith and the centrality of universal equality based on Amida's grace.¹¹ The essay was not made public during his life, though he may have composed it with the intent to publish it in the socialist newspaper *Heimin shinbun*. As we shall see below, the content is more religious than political and promotes the ideal of “equality” as the essence of “socialism.”¹²

It was also in 1904 that Yosano Akiko, the most celebrated woman poet of the day, published her anti-war poem for her younger brother (君死にたまふこと勿れ), which laments him being forcibly conscripted to fight on the front lines against Russia.¹³ Yosano visited Shingū in 1906 with her husband Tekkan 鉄幹, a famous poet in his own right. Writings left behind by Kenmyō

10. Kayoko's story is a fascinating one that deserves its own telling. As we shall see, after Kenmyō was arrested, Tashi and Kayoko were expelled from Jōsenji and, having nowhere to go, moved in with Tashi's sister in Nagoya. Poverty forced them to sell Kayoko as a geisha in the Ōsu district of Nagoya, and she eventually converted to Tenrikyō (through a meeting with her biological mother), and became a well-known Tenrikyō preacher. In addition to sources cited later, see also IKEDA 1997.

11. For a complete and annotated translation by Robert Rhodes, see TAKAGI 2000.

12. It is possible that the title was inspired partly by Tolstoy's essay “My Religion.”

13. On Yosano Akiko and her poetry, see YOSANO 1996 and 2002.

show that he was very excited about her visit and quite taken by her and her poetry, even writing a poem of his own in her honor.¹⁴ No doubt Yosano's poetry was influential in Kenmyō's own thought and writings.

Another aspect of Kenmyō's social activism appeared in 1906, when he opposed, without success, the establishment of a public brothel in Shingū. After the brothel opened, he expressed his opposition by proposing to wake up early in the morning, go to the entrance of the brothel, write down the names of those who emerged, and deliver the list of their names to the local newspaper.¹⁵

Kōtoku Shūsui in Shingū and the "High Treason Affair"

Kenmyō's involvement in "socialism" deepened through his contacts with Kōtoku Shūsui (1871–1911), a prominent and outspoken socialist, and founder and editor of the socialist newspaper *Heimin shinbun*. Shūsui was also a close friend of Dr. Ōishi, and during the summer of 1908, when Shūsui became ill while travelling back to Tokyo from a speaking tour, he disembarked from the boat at Shingū to be treated at Ōishi's clinic and recuperate there. The stay was short, about two weeks from 25 July to 8 August, but this proved to be the link between Kōtoku Shūsui and the Shingū group as "co-conspirators" in the High Treason Affair. Kōtoku was invited to give a talk at Jōsenji on the evening of 29 July, when he spoke on the topic "Naturalism from the Perspective of Socialism" (社会主義より見たる自然主義). A going-away party was held for Shūsui on the banks of the Kumano river on 1 August, attended by the "usual suspects" (known as the "Shingū group"),¹⁶ and the same group gathered for a New Year party early in 1909.¹⁷ It is not

14. My thanks to Yamaguchi Noriyuki for showing me these personal items.

15. As explained by OKINO Iwasaburō in his novel *Sei o toshite* (1919, 156–57), though it is not known whether or not Kenmyō actually acted on this plan; for an English translation of this section see OGI 2007, 51.

16. The "Shingū Group" refers to the six people who were arrested as co-conspirators in the High Treason Affair: 1. Ōishi Seinosuke (1867–1911); 2. Nariishi Heishirō 成石平四郎 (1882–1911); 3. Takagi Kenmyō (1864–1914); 4. Mineo Setsudō 峯尾節堂 (1885–1919), a Rinzai Buddhist priest; 5. Nariishi Kanzaburō 成石勘三郎 (1882–1911), the owner of a general store in Hongū; and 6. Sakikubo Sei'ichi 崎久保誓一 (1885–1955), a local journalist.

17. Okino Iwasaburō, the pastor of the Shingū Church, was also a usual member of the group, but he did not attend the parties since he could not drink saké. As a result he was not arrested as a co-conspirator, though he was taken in for questioning. This opened him

difficult to imagine that during these occasions they discussed the problems of Japanese society and what should be done to bring about change, but the government claimed (without any evidence) that it was during these meetings that they conspired to assassinate the emperor.

It was in early 1910 that the government began to move against “socialists” and to make arrests in what came to be known as the “High Treason Affair.” The background can be summarized as follows:

As is well known, the Meiji Constitution contained a clause which stated that the emperor was “sacred and inviolable” and in order to back up such a claim, the government incorporated the crime of High Treason (*taigyaku-zai* 大逆罪) into the criminal law in 1908, which held that anyone who harmed, or attempted to harm, the emperor or his direct descendents would be put to death. It just so happened that in May 1910, some workers in a lumber mill in Nagano prefecture were arrested for the illegal possession of explosives. In the course of interrogation, it was discovered that they had been planning to assassinate the emperor, and because of this, they were tried for the above crime. Yamagata Arimoto, who held the reins of government in those days, decided to use this opportunity to eradicate socialists and anarchists whose influence had been growing in Japanese society. The prosecution concocted a story about their plotting to assassinate the emperor with the prominent socialist Kōtoku Shūsui as their ringleader. This government fabrication became known as the “High Treason Affair” in which Takagi Kenmyō was implicated. (AMA 2001, 48)

Ōishi, Kenmyō, and others had their houses searched on 3 June, and were arrested as “witnesses” two days later. They were interrogated by the police and government officials and transferred on 25 June to Tokyo for trial. The transcripts of the interrogations indicate that Kenmyō did not appreciate the seriousness of the situation, and indeed trial documents show that the government had no evidence for the charges. Nevertheless a total of twenty-four “conspirators” were arrested and put on trial for plotting to assassinate the emperor, including the six members of the “Shingū group.”

to the accusation of being a “traitor” who had turned on his friends, but records show that this was not the case. Nevertheless, haunted by these suspicions and in honor of his friends, he wrote a series of historical-biographical novels and short stories to disseminate information about the “true facts” of the affair. Much of the personal information we have about Kenmyō are based on these biographical stories by Okino.

The response by the Ōtani organization was swift. A delegation was sent to Shingū and Jōsenji to examine the situation. The report praises Takagi Kenmyō as a serious and well-liked priest, but did nothing to try to counter the government charges against him. As soon as the trial began, the Ōtani organization announced that Kenmyō's ordination has been revoked (*samen* 差免). As soon as Kenmyō was found guilty, the Ōtani organization excommunicated him (*hinseki* 賓斥), the most severe punishment they could inflict. The following day they sent out instructions (*yukoku* 諭告; or 諭達) to all their temples denouncing Kenmyō and warning that such a person should never be allowed to appear among Shinshū priests again, and that any parishioner with such tendencies should be reported to the authorities.¹⁸

This immediate and negative response by the Ōtani-ha to Takagi's arrest was, sad to say, not unusual. The Sōtō sect's response to the arrest of Uchiyama Gudō 内山愚童 in the same incident was almost exactly the same, as Ishikawa Rikizan explains:

The response of the Sōtō sect headquarters to this incident was to send a note to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and to the court stating that Uchiyama had already been removed from the rolls of the Sōtō sect, and apologizing for their negligence in controlling the situation. There was absolutely no attempt to question the authorities or see to the facts of the matter. On 30 March 1911, the Sōtō sect headquarters published “An Interpretation of a Blemish” (*Kunkai ippan* 訓誡一斑), a record of meetings sponsored by the sect concerning the Taigyaku Incident on 16 to 18 February, soon after Gudō's execution. Over a hundred of the leaders and teachers of the Sōtō sect, including the presidents of the Sōtō schools, were gathered together at the sect headquarters for talks on the incident. Invited speakers included Shiba Junrokurō, director of the Religions Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; Inoue Yūichi, director of the Department of Shrines; Inoue Tetsujirō, professor of Tokyo Imperial University; and Koyama Atsushi, director of the Prisons Department of the Ministry of Justice. It records that the head priests of both Eihei-ji and Soji-ji were reprimanded. It goes on to say that Japanese Buddhism is based on the idea of honoring the emperor and “protecting” the country 尊皇護國, that Buddhism is inseparable from the imperial family, and that this has not only been true historically but is also to be taken

18. For details see DAITŌ 2011, 152–54.

for granted as natural and right from the perspective of national polity. This offers a concise expression of the basic stance of Meiji-era Buddhists.

(ISHIKAWA 1998, 102–103)

The interrogations and trial were swift, a “rush to judgment.” The trial began on 25 December 1910, a few months after the arrests, with the prosecutors seeking execution for all twenty-four conspirators. The verdict of guilty for all concerned was delivered on 18 January 1911, a scant three weeks later. Half of the sentences, including that of Kenmyō, were commuted to “life imprisonment” due to “the compassion of the emperor,” but the remaining twelve—including Kōtoku Shūsui and Ōishi Seinosuke—were promptly executed on 24 January. Kenmyō was transferred to a prison in Akita in northern Japan. At the death of Emperor Meiji and also at the enthronement of the new Taishō emperor, in 1912, there were pardons for many of those in prison, but Kenmyō was passed over and he had good reason to believe that he would never be released.

In the meantime Kenmyō’s family—his wife Tashi and daughter Kayoko—were driven out of their home at Jōsenji and forced to move to Nagoya to live with Tashi’s sister. Faced with extreme poverty and social censure, Kayoko was eventually sold as a geisha in the Ōsu entertainment district in downtown Nagoya. Records show that Tashi visited Kenmyō in prison in June of 1914, though there is no record of what was discussed. It is not difficult to imagine their despair, with no hope of ever restoring their social, religious, or family lives. Kenmyō took his own life shortly thereafter, on 24 June. Sakikubo Seiichi, the only one of those imprisoned for “high treason” who survived the ordeal and lived on to the postwar period, reported that Kenmyō hanged himself.

Restoration of Honor

The Buddhist world, along with Japanese society in general, quickly turned against support for war and embraced “pacifism” after the defeat of Japan in 1945, but official proclamations of regret for prewar actions were slow to emerge. Gradually, however, based on the postwar release of documents and research by various scholars and Shinshū and other temple figures, it has become clear that the High Treason charges were baseless, and that the twenty-four so-called “co-conspirators” were in fact set up as victims

of a government conspiracy.¹⁹ The Shinshū Ōtani-ha officially proclaimed a policy of “no war” (*fusen ketsugi* 不戦決議) in 1995, and soon followed up by restoring Kenmyō’s ordination status and revoking his excommunication in April 1996, eighty-five years after the fact.²⁰ The following year a memorial was set up on the hillside graveyard in Shingū, and Kenmyō’s gravestone was transferred from Hamamatsu, where his daughter Kayoko had set it up several decades previously. From 1998 Jōsenji began to hold an annual memorial service in honor of Kenmyō.²¹ A public memorial stone honoring the six local “victims” (*giseisha* 犠牲者) of the High Treason Affair was built near the JR Shingū train station in 2003 after the Shingū city council passed a resolution restoring their honor.

A memorial service in honor of Takagi Kenmyō is scheduled to be held at Jōsenji on 24 June 2014, marking the one-hundredth anniversary of his death.

“My Socialism”

Let us now take a look at Takagi Kenmyō’s essay “My Socialism.”²² Kenmyō prefaces his essay by pointing out how his take on “socialism” differs from that of others:

My socialism does not derive from that of Karl Marx. Nor does it follow from Tolstoy’s pacifism. I do not seek to interpret it scientifically and propagate it throughout the world, like Katayama [Sen], Kosen [Sakai Toshihiko], or [Kōtoku] Shūsui. I have a faith that is mine alone. (TAKAGI 2000, 54)

Kenmyō is careful to insist from the start that his “socialism” is not a political theory, like that of the three prominent socialist activists he mentions. Rather:

19. See, for example, SHIODA and WATANABE 1961.

20. A reproduction of this “Proclamation No. 10” can be found at the Jōsenji homepage (<http://www1.ocn.ne.jp/~jyosenji/kokuji.htm>).

21. Part of the memorial service involves chanting Kenmyō’s essay on “My Socialism,” an early step to having the work included as part of the recognized Shinshū and Buddhist canon.

22. As mentioned above, for a complete and annotated translation of “My Socialism” by Robert Rhodes, see TAKAGI 2000. My quotes from this essay are slightly revised from Rhodes’s English translation.

I do not feel that socialism is a theory, but rather a kind of practice. Some people say that it is a prophetic call for social reform, but I think socialism is a first step... We need to reform the social system rapidly and change the social structure completely from the ground up. Some people may propagate socialism as a political theory, but I consider socialism to be related much more deeply to religion than to politics. In proceeding to reform society, we have to first begin from our own spirituality.

(TAKAGI 2000, 55)

“Socialism” is then discussed in two parts:

I. The Object of Faith

1. The Doctrine; 2. The Teacher; 3. Society

II. The Content of Faith

1. The Revolution of Thought; 2. Practical Action

The first part on “the object of faith” outlines Kenmyō’s understanding of Buddhism and how it supports his idea of “socialism.” In short, Buddhism, and in particular the universal grace of Amida, provides the basis for the equality of all people, and thus the rationale for criticizing discrimination and opposing war.²³

Amida’s main concern is with the common people. [*Namu Amida Butsu*] is the mighty voice that grants happiness and comfort to ignorant men and women. Expressed in Japanese, [*Namu Amida Butsu*] is the voice calling out to us not to worry because the transcendental being of universal good known as Amida Buddha will save us, and to have no fear because he will protect us.

(TAKAGI 2000, 55)

This religious ideal is then applied concretely to the problem of war:

This is truly absolute transcendental compassion. This is the Buddha’s universal love. We can only be appalled by those who delight in hearing that this is a command to kill... *Namu Amida Butsu* refers to peace and comfort as well as salvation and happiness provided equally to all. How can we misunderstand this *Namu Amida Butsu* to be a command to subjugate the hated enemy?

I have heard Dr. Nanjō speak several times [where he exhorted his audience

23. Note the frequent use of the word “equality” (*byōdō* 平等) in the passages below.

by saying:] “If you die, you will go to the Pure Land, so attack the enemy!” Did he stir up feelings of hostility? Is this not pitiful? (TAKAGI 2000, 55–56)

Here a specific reference is made to Nanjō Bun'yū 南條文雄, the famous scholar and compiler of the Nanjō Catalog of Buddhist texts. As a Shinshū priest he was one of the first Japanese to study Sanskrit abroad. A pioneer of modern Buddhist studies, he taught at Tokyo Imperial University and later served as president of Ōtani University. Nanjō had been travelling around Japan giving speeches and stirring up support for the war effort. One of his catch phrases was *shinuru wa gokuraku yattsukero* 死[ぬ]るハ極楽ヤツツケロ, lit. “to die is to go to the Land of Bliss, so destroy [the enemy]”!²⁴ Clearly this is the opposite of what Kenmyō took to be the message of Buddhism.

In the second section of Part I, Kenmyō presents various important figures from the Buddhist tradition as heroes of socialism and the common people. Shakyamuni is called “a great socialist of the spiritual realm” who “thought little of social rank or status” and “reformed part of the social system of his time” (TAKAGI 2000, 56). He then lists a number of figures from Japan (Saichō, Kūkai, Hōnen, Shinran, Ikkyū, Rennyo) who he claims, perhaps without historical evidence:

reserved their deepest sympathy primarily for the common people. In particular, when I remember that Shinran spoke of “fellow practitioners walking together in the same direction (*ondōbō ondōgyō* 御同朋御同行)” and stated that “the venerable titles of monks and priests (*sōzu hosshi* 僧都法師) are sued for serfs and servants,” I realize that he was not only deeply sympathetic towards the common people, but that he was also, without doubt, a socialist who realized a life of non-discrimination in the spiritual realm. In light of these points, I declare Buddhism to be the mother of the common people and the enemy of the nobility. (TAKAGI 2000, 56–57)

In the third section concerning “society,” Kenmyō argues that “the Land of Bliss is the place in which socialism is truly practiced” (TAKAGI 2000, 57). This again becomes an argument against war: “We have never heard that beings in the Land of Bliss have attacked other lands. Nor have we heard that they have started a great war for the sake of justice. Hence I am against starting a war” (TAKAGI 2000, 58).

24. Similar sentiments have been expressed in other religious traditions. Is it so surprising to find it here in a Buddhist context?

Having laid the groundwork of his faith, Kenmyō proceeds in Part II to discuss “the content of faith” and how this “revolution of thought” applies to socialism and the current social situation in Japan:

We live in a country where the common people in general are sacrificed for the fame, peerage, and medals of one small group of people. It is a society in which the common people in general must suffer for the sake of a small number of speculators. Are not the poor treated like animals at the hands of the wealthy? There are people who cry out in hunger; there are women who sell their honor out of poverty; there are children who are soaked by the rain. Rich people and government officials find pleasure in treating them like toys, oppressing them and engaging them in hard labor.... However, the Buddha continually calls to us: “I shall protect you, I shall save you, I shall help you.”

(TAKAGI 2000, 58)

This analysis leads to a call for practical action. Once again Kenmyō takes aim at the inequalities and discrimination in society. Many of the examples are quite explicit and no doubt refer to actual incidents:

Even a haughty seventy-year-old marquis who has received the Grand Order of the Chrysanthemum cannot be called an ideal human as long as he treats a pretty seventeen or eighteen-year-old like a toy. Even though a general may have been victorious in war, if he pays no attention to soldiers dead or wounded, he is not worth a penny to us. A person who beats a child just for peeping into a nobleman’s house is truly despicable. (TAKAGI 2000, 59)

For his part, Kenmyō pleads, “We cannot help but lament when we hear that religious functionaries are praying to gods and buddhas for victory [in war],” and we need to seek “upward progress” (*kōjō shinpo* 向上進歩) and “community life” (*kyōdō seikatsu* 共同生活), which could perhaps be summed up in the current phrase, the “common good.” In sum, “we must proceed from the spiritual realm and completely change the social system from the ground up. I am firmly convinced that this is what socialism means” (TAKAGI 2000, 60).

In closing, Kenmyō cites a passage from Shinran’s work that had been appropriated by some in the Shinshū organization who wished to justify homage to the Emperor system and support for the war effort:

In the final analysis, it would be splendid if all people who say the nenbutsu, not just yourself, do so not with thoughts of themselves, but for the sake of the imperial court and for the sake of the people of the country. Those who feel uncertain of birth [in the Pure Land] should say the nenbutsu aspiring

first for their own birth. Those who feel that their own birth is completely settled should, mindful of the Buddha's benevolence, hold the nenbutsu in their hearts and say it to respond in gratitude to that benevolence, with the wish, "May there be peace in the world, and my the Buddha's teachings spread!"

(*A Collection of Letters* [*Go-shōsoku-shū* 御消息集] in HIROTA 1997, 1: 560)

"Alas," adds Kenmyō, "this is an example of the old adage that 'fear makes us see monsters in the dark.' Although the passage above is a gospel²⁵ for peace, have people mistaken it for the sound of a bugle commanding us to attack the enemy?" (TAKAGI 2000, 60). The message of Buddhism and the equality promised by Amida's universal grace, says Kenmyō, should not be used to call people to war, or to justify social discrimination. He closes with the words, "I am fortunate in that I hear both bugles and bells of battle as gospels for peace. Many thanks. *Namu Amida Butsu*" (TAKAGI 2000, 60).

Final Thoughts

What, then, can we say about Takagi Kenmyō, his life and times—and also of our times—without trivializing his death or passing judgement on his persecutors? He is in many ways a tragic figure, an "ordinary" person caught up in the raging currents of the times and the victim of forces beyond his control. He was a religious leader of a small temple in an out-of-the-way corner of Japan, sympathetic to the sufferings of his parishioners and neighbors, with an interest in poetry and a sensitivity for social issues. He was not a flaming radical with a specific political agenda for violently changing the world, nor did he have the position, authority, or means to accomplish it. He had an idealistic, almost naïve, and simple faith: Amida's grace is avail-

25. The use of the term "gospel" (*fukuin* 福音) here is intriguing. This term is, of course, the common Christian term for the first four Gospels—the "good news"—of the New Testament, and is not a compound that can be found in any traditional Buddhist text. No doubt Kenmyō was echoing the discourse of his Christian friends. Again, in 1903, Katayama Sen 片山 潜, a leading socialist and Protestant social worker who was mentioned at the beginning of Kenmyō's essay, published a work called *Waga shakaishugi* in which he wrote "In other words, socialism is the gospel of the working class" 換言せば社会主義は労働者階級の福音なり。 (My thanks to David Ambaras of North Carolina State University for pointing this out to me in an email of 15 April 2012.) This use of this term was probably common currency among those promoting socialism at the time, many of whom were Christians.

able for all equally, and therefore all people are equal and should be treated equally without social discrimination. This was more a religious than a political stance that is hardly necessary to couch in terms of “socialism.” Indeed there are many other important political and economic facets to “socialism” than merely the ideal of equality,²⁶ yet it was this discourse and his “socialist” connections that led to his tragic end.

After a number of years in prison, Kenmyō was faced with spending the rest of his life there with no hope of redemption. He had been twice passed over for a pardon. His social, religious, economic, and personal life was in ruins. He had been abandoned, even condemned, by his own religious organization and colleagues. His family was in dire straits. The ideals he had lived for had been turned cruelly against him. And—dare we say it—there is tragic irony in contemplating the possibility that if Kenmyō had not been falsely arrested, tried, and died in prison, he may not be remembered at all. We can only wonder if Kenmyō, so overcome by despair as to take his own life, ever imagine that a hundred years later his life and work would be remembered, even celebrated, not only in Japan but in religious and academic circles around the world. Most certainly not. In his last days, did his faith in Amida’s grace offer him comfort? We can never know. And yet, perhaps the greatest irony is that his anti-discrimination and anti-war stance is now mainstream, the “official line”—although not of his own doing—of both popular new Buddhist movements and also of traditional Buddhist institutions in Japan, where Takagi Kenmyō is now lauded as a hero and martyr. “Anti-discrimination” and “anti-war pacifism” are the two main pillars of contemporary Japanese Buddhist social ethics. *Nolite iudicare, ut non iudicemini.*

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26. Perhaps we should also ponder, however, the famous words of George ORWELL (1938, 104): “The thing that attracts ordinary men to Socialism and makes them willing to risk their skins for it, the ‘mystique’ of Socialism, is the idea of equality.”

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